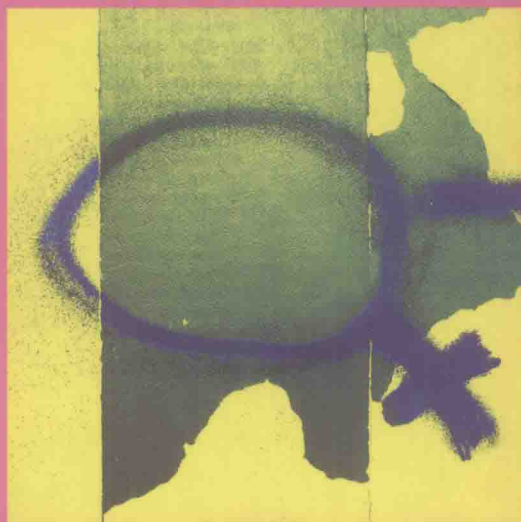


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Hélène Cixous

Abigail Bray

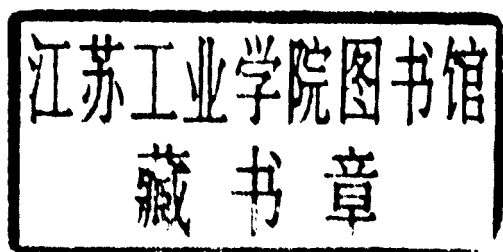


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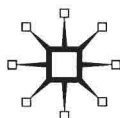
Hélène Cixous

Writing and Sexual Difference

Abigail Bray



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For Dylan
for your golden laughter

General Editor's Preface

Transitions: *transition*—, n. of action. 1. A passing or passage from one condition, action or (rarely) place, to another. 2. Passage in thought, speech, or writing, from one subject to another. 3. **a.** The passing from one note to another. **b.** The passing from one key to another, modulation. 4. The passage from an earlier to a later stage of development or formation . . . change from an earlier style to a later; a style of intermediate or mixed character . . . the historical passage of language from one well-defined stage to another.

The aim of *Transitions* is to explore passages, movements and the development of significant voices in critical thought, as these voices determine and are mediated by acts of literary and cultural interpretation. This series also seeks to examine the possibilities for reading, analysis and other critical engagements which the very idea of transition – such as the transition effected by the reception of a thinker's *oeuvre* and the heritage entailed – makes possible. The writers in this series unfold the movements and modulations of critical thinking over the last generation, from the first emergences of what is now recognized as literary theory. They examine as well how the transitional nature of theoretical and critical thinking is still very much in operation, guaranteed by the hybridity and heterogeneity of the field of literary studies. The authors in the series share the common understanding that, now more than ever, critical thought is both in a state of transition and can best be defined by developing for the student reader an understanding of this protean quality. As this *tranche* of the series, dealing with particular critical voices, addresses, it is of great significance, if not urgency, that the texts of particular figures be reconsidered anew.

This series desires, then, to enable the reader to transform her/his own reading and writing transactions by comprehending past developments as well as the internal transitions worked through by particular literary and cultural critics, analysts, and

philosophers. Each book in the series offers a guide to the poetics and politics of such thinkers, as well as interpretative paradigms, schools, bodies of thought, historical and cultural periods, the genealogy of particular concepts, while transforming these, if not into tools or methodologies, then into conduits for directing and channelling thought. As well as transforming the critical past by interpreting it from the perspective of the present day, each study enacts transitional reading of critical voices and well-known literary texts, which are themselves conceivable as having been transitional and influential at the moments of their first appearance. The readings offered in these books seek, through close critical reading and theoretical engagement, to demonstrate certain possibilities in critical thinking to the student reader.

It is hoped that the student will find this series liberating because rigid methodologies are not being put into place. As all the dictionary definitions of the idea of transition above suggest, what is important is the action, the passage: of thought, of analysis, of critical response, such as are to be found, for example, in the texts of critics whose work has irrevocably transformed the critical landscape. Rather than seeking to help you locate yourself in relation to any particular school or discipline, this series aims to put you into action, as readers and writers, travellers between positions, where the movement between poles comes to be seen as of more importance than the locations themselves.

Julian Wolfreys

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Introduction

Fortunately, when someone says ‘woman,’ we still don’t know what that means, even if we know what we want to mean. . . . In any case, she is not *a* woman. She is plural. Like all living beings, who are sometimes invaded, drawing life from others, giving life. Who do not know themselves.

Hélène Cixous, ‘Tancredi Continues’ (1991c)

The relationship to pleasure and the law, and the individual’s response to this strange, antagonistic relationship, inscribe – whether we are men or women – different paths through life. It is not anatomical sex or essence that determines us in anything; it is, on the contrary, the affable from which we never escape, individual and collective history, the cultural schema, and the way the individual negotiates with these structures, with these data, adapts to them and reproduces them, or else gets around them, overcomes them, goes beyond them, gets through them – there are a thousand formulas – and connects or never connects with a universe ‘without fear and without reproach’.

Hélène Cixous, ‘The Author in Truth’ (1991f)

Hélène Cixous is a key thinker within feminist literary theory, politics and philosophy: her work has shaped the cutting-edge questions of post-structuralist literary theory and philosophy and her writing continues to be an important reference for the issues which Western intellectuals have been interrogating since the revolutionary 1960s. Cixous’s refusal to conform to the traditional boundaries of academic writing, her championing of a profoundly ‘feminine’ style of thinking which is both rigorous and intimate, intellectual and defiantly personal, has opened up many creative possibilities for how we think and write about sexual difference, philosophy and literature. Throughout her writing, Cixous challenges the exclusions which inform dominant systems of representation in an

attempt to make language circulate more freely, less destructively, more democratically. Cixous's work continually comes back to the importance of grounding knowledge in a humble recognition of the power of the quotidian forces in our lives. In effect this means recognizing the possibility of subverting larger power structures through a revolutionary change on an embodied everyday level.

Cixous was born in 1937 in Algeria to a mother of Austro-German origins and a father of French-colonial and Jewish origins. Like many of us, then, she was born into a mixed and fragile cultural heritage with competing loyalties and affiliations, and complex histories. And like many of us she felt she did not belong, that her place in the world was fragile, on the borders, condemned to an exile never quite understood. This cultural background made her sensitive to the physical dynamics of exclusion and throughout her work the idea of exile, and of the border between the proper and the improper, continue to drive her championing of freedom from oppressive and exclusive forms of naming.

Another gift from her childhood (and it must be understood as a gift) is her early intimacy with death. Her father died when she was a little girl. This early death touched her deeply and it is a death which continues to weep through her writing. The loss of her father was also an initiation into depth and it is through the process of mourning his loss that Cixous has sought a poetic and philosophical intimacy with loss in general. Her writing is preoccupied with death, loss and lack not because she is bound by a fear of the abyss but because through mourning this formative loss she was able to fall through it into a life-affirming writing. Death for her became an initiation into living deeply and thinking down through the depths of the unspoken. Negativity in all its myriad forms, the destruction of others, the dynamics of self-destruction, everything which uses death as an excuse for loss of love, passion, freedom and justice is fought against in Cixous's writing as a limit which must be passed through in order to reach life. Through death, then, Cixous found her will to write and live.

Lacking a home, she sought one in the limitless country of writing, which knows no borders, which welcomes all exiles. One of her first passions was for myth and the works of German Romanticism, which was followed by her interest in English literature. Shakespeare, now so unfashionable, caught her imagination and she continues to find his writing profoundly inspiring. *Antony and*

Cleopatra is one of her favourite plays. This avant-garde writer, then, has her inspiration in the classics. She began her career as an academic when she was twenty-two, then married and bore two children. She divorced in 1965 and moved to Paris, where she entered the intellectual scene with some energy, soon establishing herself as a leading activist and intellectual. She was vocal during the events of May 1968 and afterwards she established the radical and experimental (anti)institution the Université de Paris VIII–Vincennes, which was designed as an alternative to what was thought of by many as the oppressively hierarchical structure of French education. Sometime later, in 1974, she founded the Centre de Recherches en Études féminines. With Tzvetan Todorov and Gerard Genette, around this time she also founded the influential experimental revue *Poétique*, which gained critical recognition in American intellectual circles. Her publications also began in the late 1960s with her doctoral dissertation on James Joyce, and her first novel, *Dedans*, in 1969, which won a prestigious French literary award.

Since then she has written and published an impressive range of writing within many genres. However, she perhaps still remains best known in America and England for her relatively early work in the 1970s on her controversial yet influential concept of *écriture féminine*, or ‘writing in the feminine’. Cixous can be understood not simply as the founder of *écriture féminine* but as an ‘organic’ intellectual, in the sense that she can genuinely think and write in a range of genres about a range of issues. She is also a very avant-garde writer, who can be difficult to read because her poetico-philosophical writing interrogates itself just as much as it interrogates dominant systems of representation. However, what might be perceived to be a rather lofty disdain for the everyday in her writing is strongly undermined once one recognizes that most of her work is about the quotidian, the extraordinary within the ordinary, and the importance of grounding thinking in an attention to the minute and often overlooked gestures embodied in everyday life. Despite what may be read as her rather elite status as a difficult French avant-garde writer, a darling of the exclusive Parisian salons, she writes with an often very raw openness about concerns which touch us all.

Cixous’s passion for freedom inspires all of her work; it motivated her initial interest in psychoanalysis and the repression of

female sexuality, guided her feminist writing, inspired her writings on the plight of the Third World, and motivated her writing on the Russian and German death camps. Such passions have guided her interest in Clarice Lispector, Nelson Mandela, Paul Celan, Marina Tsvetaeva and Ossip Mandelstam to name a few. On a biographical level, her continuing friendship with Jacques Derrida, and her close relationships with the well-known feminist activist and founder of the *Des Femmes* publishing house, Antoinette Fouque, and the founder of the experimental *Théâtre du Soleil*, Ariane Mnouchkine, have all had a profound influence on her life and work. Cixous is clearly an energetic force within the French intellectual scene, her writing has had a major impact on feminist thought in the last three decades and she remains one of the most respected French feminist intellectuals living today. This is reason enough to read her work. To read Cixous is to read one of the most important thinkers of our time and to engage in some of the more important ideas that have shaped intellectual life in recent history. To read Cixous is also to enter into the challenge of thinking through sexual difference not just on a grand poetico-philosophical level but on the level of the everyday, for how we think of ourselves as women and men and how we assume, enact and subvert the roles and languages of sexual difference affects us on that level. For Cixous, change and freedom comes into being at this very intimate everyday level, by unmasking and interrogating the language we use to speak through sexual difference.

One of the most powerful and provocative categories of analysis to have emerged within critical thinking in the last few decades is sexual difference. The question of sexual difference, largely circulated by feminism, has haunted a diverse range of discourses and critical practices, from cultural studies to philosophy, from literary theory to sociology, producing a plethora of popular and specialized debates. That the question of sexual difference has generated such a diverse range of writing on the subject, that sexual difference is largely understood to be integral to all cultural practices and all forms of knowledge production, indicates the importance of continuing to think through the relationship between it and writing. How we perform or write sexual difference affects us on a personal and a political level. Neo-evolutionary discourses about the genetic destiny of men and women, as well as government policies which affect families, are all ways of writing about sexual

difference which impact on the way we perform our sexual identity in the world. In other words, sexual difference is not simply a rarefied, disembodied term which circulates within theory or philosophy, for how one's sexuality is read by the world and how one writes one's sexuality impacts on the way one lives, works and thinks. How we understand sexual difference affects the choices we make in life and the choices which are made available to us.

Cixous's contribution to the question of sexual difference is, perhaps quite simply, that it must remain a question – that answering finally and forever just what sexual difference is, is to limit our democratic freedom. By calling attention to the importance of keeping alive the question of sexual difference she is not advocating hedonism, a lawless libertarian indulgence, or an ethical relativism. Rather, Cixous argues that if we define what it means to be a man or a woman we risk a fundamentalist orthodoxy about sexual difference which limits rather than liberates our understanding of what it means to be human. As history has shown, definitions of what female sexual identity is has often led to a reduction in women's democratic rights. To argue that we have now escaped the clutches of an oppressive past, that somehow we are more democratic and more enlightened simply because time has passed, is to retain a rather naïve faith in a linear narrative of historical progress. New limitations of what it means to be a sexed being are now facing new subjects, while some of the older limitations are still very much in place.

While Cixous does not directly deal with the socio-economic problems associated with fixed definitions of what it means to be a sexed being, she offers a way of opening up the question of sexual difference to thought, so that such problems can be challenged. By this I do not mean that Cixous is offering a blueprint for social change or a prescriptive politics – she has no global answers because such answers are for her the very problem she seeks to overcome in her writing. (In this respect her work should be distinguished from Luce Irigaray's later work, which has tended to formulate rather dogmatic cultural and political interventions.) Instead of searching in Cixous's writing for a consistent politics of intervention or an easily applicable theory of sexual difference, it is more productive to approach her writing as a guide to thinking. For Cixous, the question of sexual difference is inseparable from thought itself, from the process of cognition, consciousness or the

creation of meaning. To think through the question of sexual difference is also, therefore, to enter into the process of thinking. This does not mean that Cixous is arguing that thinking about sexual difference is the only way of thinking, but rather that sexual difference presents us with an opening up into thinking because thought is a process through which we explore the relationship between self and other, identity and difference, and that relationship is primarily one which is represented as sexual difference.

However, if sexual difference is recognized as a primary difference it does not mean that all other differences are read as an effect of sexual difference. Cixous would not argue, for example, that sexual inequality is the grounds for all other racial or economic inequalities – she is not a radical feminist. Rather, she would argue that the violence which results in a devaluing of a particular sexed being is part of a larger violence in which difference is ordered and valued. It is this larger violence which Cixous writes against, for while she obviously writes a great deal about sexual difference, she does so in order to explore the force of violence in general, in order to move towards a more democratic, less destructive thinking.

On one level Cixous is a writer of simple wisdom, she argues that it is fear which endows power with the ability to oppress, that the spectre of our own death prevents us from living, that hatred tortures the one who hates, that love is infinitely mysterious. She is also an intimate writer, or a writer of intimacies, and some have found this close, slow attention to detail, this elaborate exploration of subjectivity, to be a mannered posturing before the altar of the Self. And yet, her attention to intimacy with the other, and the other within the self, the not-self, is not so much a weak narcissistic retreat but a courageous confrontation with the writing, the textuality, of subjectivity. Self-serving piety towards the other, gratuitous sentiments, indulgent retreats into the already written, the already known, a passive acceptance of sexual destiny, fear before the Law, are all ways of thinking and relating which Cixous fiercely challenges as practices which support oppression. In this respect she is a hard thinker to follow because she is relentless, in the sense that Nietzsche is relentless, in her affirmation of life over death, of courage over fear. To think is to think creatively, argues Cixous, and to think creatively is to have a courageous relationship to difference.

What do we mean by this? To have a courageous relationship to

difference, to the other, is to master the fear of the unknown which nourishes destructive thinking. Such a relationship is also a movement towards, a crossing over. As Cixous writes in 'Tancredi Continues': 'Is the crossing vertiginous? Like every crossing. Useless to contemplate or fathom what separates: the abyss is always invented by our fear. We leap and there is grace. Acrobats know: do not look at the separation. Have eyes, have bodies, only for there, for the other' (Cixous 1991c: 79). To enter into a courageous relationship with difference is to take a leap of faith in life and discover grace, to meet the other's body through a fearless movement which recognizes the abyss as merely a spectre. Creative thought is a courageous movement, an acrobatic leap across the vertiginous shadow cast by fear.

This movement occurs within 'writing', which for Cixous is a word that encompasses signification, or the process of making meaning, thinking in general. Dismissing the power of a Cartesian separation between mind and body as a phallogentric fiction, Cixous understands embodied thinking as a form of writing in order to emphasize the productive force of such a thinking. To think is also to write, to create meaning, and that process of production is embodied. The writing which, Cixous argues, performs a creative movement towards difference, which is capable of mastering a fear of the abyss, is feminine because it is productive, generative, radiant with affirmation. Masculine or phallogentric writing is caught up in a reactionary relationship to fear, difference and the other, and remains locked into a destructive repetition of hierarchies. Such a writing remains petrified before the abyss, rigid with fear, and so cannot enter into the acrobatic flight of thinking. In other words, phallogentric writing is a type of *anti-thinking*. Such a thinking would manifest as fundamentalism, as homophobia, economic oppression, sexism, racism, anthropomorphism, all forms of thinking which rest upon a fear-based relationship to difference and the other. Such a writing would lack the necessary courage to challenge the authority of what Cixous terms the 'Logic of Destruction', or a reactionary relationship to fear of the other, and therefore becomes a form of violence. In an ironic sense then, it is phallogentric writing or thinking which *lacks* the necessary strength of courage to overcome fear: rigid strength is revealed to be petrified fear. If the feminine has been associated with lack within psychoanalytic

discourses, with absence, the abyss, and endowed with all that is less than the masculine by a plethora of other discourses, Cixous suggests, rather wickedly and with some humour, that yes, the feminine does lack, but what 'she' lacks is the fear of lack. Lacking a fear of lack or the abyss, feminine writing is able to perform an acrobatic flight into thinking, to cross over to difference and the other.

It is important to recognize that masculine and feminine writing are not tied to biological sexed bodies. Cixous circulates the feminine as a metaphor in her writing and not as a literal reference to a biological sex. In this respect she would not argue that phallogocentric thinking or writing is limited to men or that feminine thinking or writing is limited to women. Women too can fear lack, indeed have been often encouraged to assume that they lack, and have become petrified with fear in the face of the abyss. Men can form a non-reactionary relationship to fear, difference and the other. If Cixous encourages women to write their bodies in the *écriture féminine* manifesto 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1980a), it is because she is a feminist who is urging women to enter into the flight of thinking by rewriting female lack. The essentialist charges made against Cixous often neglect the metaphoric content of her writing.

Cixous is a prolific writer, having authored dozens of novels, plays, philosophical, critical and autobiographical texts. Here we will not be attempting a comprehensive and final overview of work which is still in progress, still being written. Instead, we will be focusing on the subject of writing and sexual difference in her work in order to clarify how she approaches these subjects. The first part of the book examines her intellectual roots, setting the scene for her writing by exploring the context in which she thinks. Various debates about the intellectual and political merit of her writing will also be considered. I will also be identifying some of the major concepts in her writing so that readers who are not familiar with her work have a better understanding of Cixous's major concerns. The second part will offer a series of Cixousian readings of a number of writers. The texts of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Clarice Lispector and Angela Carter are all opened up to Cixousian readings. The purpose of this section is to continue to elaborate Cixous's ideas and also to enter into the acrobatic flight of thinking which she names 'feminine'. Hopefully, what is achieved is a