

Readings.

The Poetics of
Blanchot, Joyce,
Kafka, Kleist, Lispector,
and Tsvetayeva

HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

Edited, translated, and introduced by
Verena Andermatt Conley

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Introduction

The present volume can be read side by side with *Reading with Clarice Lispector* (University of Minnesota Press, 1990). The readings included were given in seminar form by Hélène Cixous between 1980 and 1986 at the Université de Paris VIII, at the Centre d'Etudes Féminines. The selections are my own, except for the passages on Kleist that Cixous wished to have included. The organization into chapters, as well as the selection of about 600 pages for the two volumes from among the original 2,500 pages, are also my own. I kept those passages that seemed the most significant—at times the most controversial—of Cixous's thought. Much of the material under discussion—all eminently readable because of the pedagogical tenor of the seminars—is elsewhere transformed poetically in her fictional writings. In these pages she explains what her fiction performs. The seminars can be read as laboratory for Cixous's fictional and critical practices.

Given the oral nature of this material, the problems in translation, as outlined in the first volume, have to do mainly with recurring expressions. To avoid excessive repetition, I have modified some of the prevailing use of the *il y a*. For Cixous, the deictic expression *il y a* constitutes a statement of no origin that brings with it a gift of language. The implied sense of a gratuitous "giving" has had to be somewhat attenuated. A number of other expressions also remain difficult to translate. For example, *du côté de*, "on the side of," is one of Cixous's favorite formulas, used in the context of her simultaneous reading of several texts at once. It was rendered variably as "in the direction of," "toward," or "leaning toward." *Etre dans quelque chose*, "to be into something," which has a colloquial ring in English, has been changed to "to engage in" or other synonyms. The neo-Hegelian

expression, *travailler sur quelque chose*, “to work on something,” has been transposed as “to study,” “to explore,” or “to see.” For the literary texts discussed by Cixous, at times I have modified the English translations to make them correspond more closely to her own readings, which are based primarily on French translations, especially where the latter seem closer to the tenor of her analyses.

A result of Cixous’s reading practices, the juxtaposition of texts in the two volumes across centuries and national boundaries opens possibilities of multiple readings in various directions that acquire many shadings, flickers, and refractions. Cixous’s reading of texts side by side, at times dialectical by implication (for example, in the chapter on Blanchot and Lispector), is always in movement and prevents mastery or appropriation of the text by the reader. The primary carrier of Cixous’s readings is an ongoing interest in poetry attached to the proper name of Clarice Lispector, whose texts are read alongside those of Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Blanchot, and Tsvetayeva. Many of these proper names have crisscrossed Cixous’s texts since the beginning of her career as a writer. Lispector has been a concern for a number of years, but the shift toward Eastern Europe is recent and now (in 1990) indicates how artists’ interests announce political events that follow. If the texts chosen by Cixous reflect in various ways a preoccupation with writing as well as an insistence on pleasure, they are also linked to current issues in literary theory. Cixous’s analyses offer at times welcome divergences from more established canonical lines. She takes up now-consecrated literary figures, mainly from the past. Rarely do her analyses extend to contemporary culture in a specific sense. She chooses to stay within the aura of what she calls “poetic writing.” Cixous’s purpose in these seminars seems twofold: to essay certain kinds of textual readings without advocating a style or a simple interpretation; and to develop further discourse concerning ethics.

Despite a synchronic approach to the texts and a concentration on generations of writers rather than surrounding facts (dates, sources, filiations) or, more broadly, literary history, nevertheless a shift in interest emerges between 1980 and 1986, from work on the origin of writing and the primal scene, or love and the gift, to problems of history. There is an avowed change, in Cixous’s terms, “from the scene of the unconscious to that of history.” The artist is now viewed caught in historical turmoil. But emphasis is still placed on the scene, on the word and poetry, on topics that do not immediately mobilize an overt activism. Cixous’s general, almost clichéd pronouncements on history may startle the reader but her close readings of texts are always compelling.

Next to a growing interest in cultures of the Third World (here in the seminars mainly those of South America), the holocaust, and Eastern European countries, something else now comes forward, in the *après-coup*, that is manifested in her strong affiliation with the Jewish question and with its cultural representatives past and present — Freud, Kafka, Lispector, Celan, Derrida, and others. The question is treated mainly in Cixous’s association of Jew and poet. Through the wandering

Jew and the poet given over to wandering, outside society, Cixous asserts her own belief in a poetic absolute. Here too one can sense a shift, moving away from an earlier need to disconcert the reader, toward a search for a technique that would best render, if not an adequation, at least a proximity between life, milieu, and writing. Poetry is not understood as subversive, as a “revolution” in and of language, but as that which precludes strategies of capture or containment and that — contrary to philosophy — allows for otherness. Cixous’s belief in the virtues of poetry in its largest sense is much opposed to the development of a certain prose common to modern technocracies, in which discourse favors the efficacy of clarity and the pragmatics of meaning and fills all the gaps and fissures for the purpose of appropriation. Poetry, not in its Apollonian form but as a residue of Dionysian culture, insists on a necessary *part sauvage*.

Her emphasis on poetry points to a tradition that can be traced across time but that has become particularly marked since the early nineteenth century; this tradition invokes attention to nature, the literary absolute, and a view that art must take a leading role in social change. These traditions are glimpsed through the names of Schiller, Schelling, and others. This also suggests why Cixous — and a long-standing literary relationship with James Joyce and *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics confirms the point — is more attracted to early and middle romantic writers or to those whose aesthetics reach back to them. She chooses not to question the limits of a poetic art form in a technological age other than through overt rejection of media-generated writings that she calls “noise machines.” Identification with the romantic topos of writing poetry with one’s eyes closed does not allow for consideration of the pervasive impact of film or the media, or of what Paul Virilio calls a general “*politics of speed*.” Cixous’s main concession seems to be a move from a private to a public sphere, or from the autobiographical novel to the collective stage.

The lesson taught in these pages — and a lesson is to be learned, not in the sense of a constituted morality, but in that of an apprenticeship of life, joy, and pleasure — is based on *other* forms of exchange. Cixous does not confine herself to any one critical theory, and blatantly claims that she has no debt to pay to anyone nor any peer to please. Although the gesture may appear supercilious enough to disconcert many of her readers, Cixous does not hesitate to associate a writer’s proper name with the text. Hence the ubiquitous formulas such as “Clarice says,” or “Kleist shows,” seemingly a recovery of the self-identical author that would be heresy for many contemporary critics. The formula must not be read as naïve regression to the plenary self, but rather as a way, like in Proust, to keep the text under study separate from both biography and the real person. Similarly, the proper names in the texts read, be they Ofélia, Penthesilea, or Toni, are part of a network of forces more than references to “real characters.” Cixous listens to the writer’s text somewhat in the way an analyst listens to speech. Her readings, close to analysis, do not herald a so-called rigor that would be demanded of a disciple of any school but point out the law that establishes the theoretical truths.

Over the years Cixous's writings, like those of others of the French vanguard, have run the gamut of experimentations with writerly techniques. They have never been devoid of a strong sense of the *real*, even if the effect of reality is a psychic one. Her readings are at their best when irreverent in respect to certain master texts, which she does not hesitate to approach, turn inside out, look at closely or hold at a distance. She never relies on a priori, mystifying signature-effects. Central for her is an apprenticeship of and through life, a necessity to experience pleasure no matter what the circumstances; her texts do not center on an affirmation of one's own alienation. The reader's enjoyment and apprenticeship may be derived from Cixous's radarlike perceptions of all the shadings of human relations that can serve as lessons of life. Accent is placed on the necessity of an *accord*, a vibration—that is, on a linking with the world rather than on a break with it. Yet for Cixous, there *is* an “outside” of the text, a world and reality. In that way, reading and writing are both exploration (utopia) and consolation (redemption). She is aware that certain things are made possible through writing, but also that others are possible only in writing. Cixous privileges the absolute—that which is outside a social world, with its laws and median desire. This absolute metaphorized most often by a summit, maintains little relationship with collectivities, especially in their present form of increased massification and not simply of “crowds” (as Cixous would like to have it in her reading of the Soviet space), and may no longer be viable today.

The seminars veer away from some of Cixous's more militant feminism of the seventies. Though still present, the demarcation line between objects good and bad is attenuated. In the wake of *Lispector*, Cixous looks straight at a person or an object and sees, hears, everything, rather than selectively, and chooses elements needed for given ideological battles. The opposition between men and women fades even in its derivative form of “masculine” and “feminine,” or those who retain and those who give. Rather, she decants poetry and its representatives—that is, poets from all over the world and across the ages. Of importance is their communication through communion with each other and with the world. Some residue of an opposition between men and women still exists, with its ensuing rivalries, similar to the conventional strife between philosophy and poetry. It surges, for example, in what Cixous has called her “ongoing dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” with whom she obviously also shares much, from her Jewishness to her North African origins. Though Cixous's seminars are infused with philosophy, here especially with a kind of Kantian Hegelianism in her reading of the sublime, she uses Derrida's textual philosophy for the purpose of working against it. Cixous becomes the poet who can do what philosophers cannot, that is, account for the living or for otherness within a realm of intelligible experience. Poets can live with noncomprehension where philosophers are in constant need of co-opting the limit through concepts. A certain verticality pervades all of Cixous's discourse. And while we readily agree that there is invention only through a leap,

why then the need to refer back constantly to a theory that serves as *point d'appui* (a basis) for a rivalry? Yet Cixous's comments in this volume on a few pages from *Margins of Philosophy* in relation to alterity, noncomprehension, and the limit count among the most unusually perceptive readings of Derrida.

The valorizing of poetry, language, and the experimental text in Cixous's double fight against personal and institutional repression echoes, at least in its second part, that of other thinkers who have come out of May 1968, including Derrida, but also Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel de Certeau. Such emphasis can perhaps be historicized on the hand by the kind of restrictions imposed by the French academy and by existentialist poetics that focused on subjectivity and intentionality, and that thinly disguised philosophical dogmatism to mobilize their dialectical efficacy. On the other hand, the refusal of institutionalization can be read, perhaps, as a reaction to the strong presence of the left, an outcome of the French Resistance, in its collusion with the Communist party and the problematic adherence to cultural politics reducing arts to dogma. We may recall the controversy documented in the official party-line review, *Les Lettres françaises*, directed by Louis Aragon — the very review in which Cixous will profess in an interview in November 1970 the necessity for both experimental texts and universities in France — around Picasso's drawing of a peace dove during the Korean War. The drawing was condemned by the social realist canon for being "too abstract." It is perhaps in such a climate of philosophical and political dogmatism that the necessity of a writing *not* attached to an institution, even that of literary history, emerges.

Possibly for cultural and historical reasons — though there is always in Cixous an affirmation of the necessity of the real and of the art of doing, of the *faire* — Cixous privileges the word over action and activism. For her, contrary to descendants of the Enlightenment, the world is not just acted upon and reality is not just constructed. Other articulations can and must be sought, such as those that favor life in all of its forms and that look much more for an accord with the environment in its widest sense.

To a linear, teleological line, Cixous prefers other, often non-Western modes of thinking. Perceptions radiate, reverse their courses, and diffract in all directions. With oriental echoes, she tries — especially through affinities with Lispector — to act less on a milieu or an object, a particularly Western obsession, but to be in harmony — or in a moment of grace, perhaps — with a person or a milieu. This implies a necessary passivity in activity, something that, a decade ago, might have been called femininity in contrast to a more Western, phallic masculinity that proposes change through violent action. Less idealistic than mystical, Cixous's meditations — evident in not just her readings of Lispector but also of Kleist — center more and more on ethical dilemmas, which might be called ecological and can be read in Cixous as well as in other writers. They will no doubt lead to major changes in the status of art. Over the last hundred years or so, the avant-garde has

been thought to be mainly subversive. It will henceforth need to be more corrective, if not prescriptive. Attention to a milieu or an environment cannot be heard either by those who simply prefer activism or by theoreticians questioning the issue of the origins. Yet Cixous's "origin" never refers to a fixed point. This "origin" is not that of the phenomenological subject, but of a subject with as little subjectivity as possible, one in tune with its environment and always in movement. Away from the habitual dismissal of Kleist as naïve and innocent, hence simplistic, her readings of the writer are particularly striking. Other assertions may disconcert the reader, such as the ubiquitousness of the Heideggerian expression of being "without shelter," "at risk" — which, even in the exalted and poignant discourse of Etty Hillesum, marks an elevated contrast with most critical accounts of the holocaust and is, it can be said, a worn-out metaphor, at least in view of the contemporary social dilemmas concerning those without shelter.

Cixous underscores apprenticeship and "difficult" joys over alienation and by so doing opts for what I choose to call cultural ecology. Her appeal to a force of life and her overtly utopian belief that to think is to make possible, does not address, but rejects, the world of advertisement and profit intent on stamping out cultural memory. To be sure, everyone is participating in this world to a degree, even those marketing artistic or scholarly productions, including plays, books, translations, or lecture tours. It is perhaps no longer enough just to stay "outside a certain Freudian discourse with its fixation on castration"; we need to see how technology and the media can lead to the formation of entirely new subjectivities. If it can be argued that Cixous's readings refuse historical specificity, it can also be said that they themselves carry their own historical specificity. Cixous's seminars constitute a chronicle of the French intellectual scene between 1980 and 1986. They also provide an apprenticeship for the reader through finely tuned textual readings and a disengaging of the most subtle intersubjective models. But they can be dated by their post-1968 tenor, which does not lack romantic pathos. Without rejecting Cixous's attempt and the kinds of reading she advocates, one can stress the necessity of combining her world of poetic and cultural tradition with a culture of technology. The real crux of the problem would not be an either/or choice, but a mediation between the two, something that she herself inadvertently hints at in her recent *Nuit miraculeuse*, a scenario for Ariane Mnouchkine's film on the contemporary heritage of 1789.

Cixous needs to be read less against herself — less as a proper name, a cult figure whose signature can be moneyed — but *en effet* (in effect), as a force corresponding to certain shifting preoccupations of global importance, though they might be articulated, in her own style, from a French vantage point. Through her readings we sense a concern both aesthetic and ethical for the world, and a growing preoccupation with a site, a milieu, that is, with a need for new and other links with the world, the self, and, it is hoped, social collectivities.

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction ix

1. Writing and the Law: Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, and Lispector 1

2. Grace and Innocence: Heinrich von Kleist 28

3. Apprenticeship and Alienation: Clarice Lispector and Maurice Blanchot 74

4. Poetry, Passion, and History: Marina Tsvetayeva 110

Index 153

Chapter 1

Writing and the Law

Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, and Lispector

I want to work on texts that are as close as possible to an inscription — conscious or unconscious — of the origin of the gesture of writing and not of writing itself. Writing is already something finished, something that follows the drive to write. Such texts could be expected to be among the writer's firstborn that are not afraid to be so. Clarice Lispector's *Near to the Wild Heart* is just such a text.¹ Its title is a quotation from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.²

What does it mean to work on texts that are "near to the wild heart"? Reading Clarice's text, I was struck by its extraordinary power. It is a text that has the audacity to let itself be written close to the very drive to write. At the same time, it gives the impression of being poorly written. It does not display a mastery of form or language and does not raise the question of art. It is the contrary of Flaubert. Clarice's first movement as a child was to put herself at the *écoute* of, in tune with, writing, of something that happens between the body and the world. One has to have a touch of something savage, uncultured, in order to let it happen. It is the contrary of having been so much of a student, of a scholar, that one thinks that a book is a book, and that, if one vaguely has the desire to write, one says: I have to write a book.

Clarice's text comes from within. It is written from an unformulated hypothesis that writing is something living. It is not the book as sacred object. *Near to the Wild Heart* is a kind of germination where these problems are irrelevant. It stands out by contrast with other texts, such as Flaubert's. Yet, at the same time, something makes me give Flaubert a thought, because he is one of those important beings who have a vocation — the word has to be taken in its strong meaning, in

relation to something of the order of a calling, and, of course, he answers it. Flaubert answered it when he was very young and said yes, definitely. He organized the totality of his material, psychological, and affective life in such a way that he became forever the lover of writing. He called it art, not writing. I said writing because I did not want to place him in a kind of unconscious pederasty. But art was his love object and it was inscribed in pederastic fashion. In a certain way, he was a monster. He made love with art throughout his entire life. In itself that would not be so bad if it were not done by a choice that excludes human beings. Flaubert was never in a relation of living and livable love with other human beings. His relation with Louise Collet was monstrous. Flaubert fixed a rendezvous with her only after completion of such and such a chapter. Living entirely in the universe of production of writing, he was one of its most arduous craftsmen. Like his successor, James Joyce, he thought of creation in extraordinary fashion. His "savage heart" can be found in his correspondence, a kind of *mise à nu* (laying bare) of a tyrannic drive, of an incredible rigor of the *bien écrire* (the beautifully written).

He is of interest as one of those beings who paid the price of their wager without concession. This presupposes that first one pays the price oneself; then one makes others pay. Is there a possibility of a half-gesture that would be less cruel? What does one have to pay to stay close to the savage heart? Flaubert did not give the answer, he died of it. We can see Joyce and Kafka appear in the same field.

Writing pushed to an absolute degree differs from that of human and mercantile dimensions. We can verify this by taking as the main question the locus of *writing* and not that of art. Flaubert advanced in this dilemma to the point of madness. For him, the question is not who but where, from where? In the course of the journey, Flaubert — like Kafka — got lost. Flaubert wanted people to burn all the papers he did not specifically authorize for publication and, in any case, Kafka was a dying man. Did Kafka finish something because he himself knew he was dying? All of his gestures were morbid gestures. Kafka's strongest writings are those that are unfinished, that he was only beginning, over and over again, and the same can be said of Flaubert.

James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* can be put side by side with Clarice Lispector's *Near to the Wild Heart*. Though Joyce is still quite young when he writes the novel, it is not his first, but a portrait of the primitive portrait. Joyce shows extraordinary formal mastery in this text, which is a kind of organized mobile that takes off from a very precise and coded architecture. Where Flaubert worked only on the sentence, Joyce goes further to work also on articulations.

Of importance for a reading concerning our *questions-femmes*, or woman's questions, is the place of origin and the object. What is a writer looking for? What are the stakes in the text? How does one search for something? The movements of

the body are determined by what one is looking for and the object one seeks depends on the kind of body one has. We have to work on the first and most primitive pleasure, that is to say, on orality. Rather than give answers, we have to follow the questions, the woman-questions: How does one write as woman? have pleasure as woman? We have to be transgrammatical, the way one says to be transgressive, which does not mean that we have to despise grammar but we are so used to obeying it absolutely that some work has to be done in that direction. I find it important to work on foreign texts, precisely because they displace our relationship to grammar. I will use caution too in relation to what I call trap-words (*mots-cages*). One has to be audacious in one's reading, so that it becomes an intense deciphering. We need not be afraid of wandering, though one should read in terms of a quest. There always has been femininity from time immemorial but it has been repressed. It has never been unnamed, only suppressed. But it constantly reappears everywhere. Of course, one finds more femininity in texts that are written "close to the savage heart," in texts that are still close to sources, springs, to myth and to beginnings of literary movements before they become institutionalized. Literature is like history. It is organized so as to repress and hide its own origin which always deals with some kind of femininity.

Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: Silence, Exile, and Cunning

The work Joyce produced in *Portrait of the Artist*, his *Künstlerroman*, his formative novel, is not without ambivalence. In one of the first scenes, he who will become the artist is in open opposition to the law and to authority. We have to look at the word "law" and render it more flexible. We have to analyze who lays down the law and who is in the law's place. In this respect, there is a difference between Joyce and Kafka. In Kafka, the law is not figured by anyone. In Joyce there are specific authorities. In the first page of his novel, the women threaten him with castration but, as in Clarice Lispector, the question of the father is important too. In Clarice's "Sunday, before falling asleep," the father is really a father/mother and everything is organized in the direction of the father.³ Genesis takes place in a maternal and paternal mode of production. In Joyce, something analogous is related to the very possibility of the formation of the artist. Which father produces the artist? The question is related to the superego. Yet it is not always the same self that has a repressive figure.

The first two pages of *Portrait of the Artist* can be approached through a kind of multiple reading, which is what Joycean writing asks for. We read word for word, line by line, but at the same time it has to be read—because that is how it is written—as a kind of embryonic scene. The entire book is contained in the first pages, which constitute a nuclear passage. The ensemble of Joyce's work is here like an egg or an opaque shell of calcium. An innocent reading will lead us to

believe that these pages are hermetic. One understands everything and nothing; everything because there is really nothing obscure, nothing because there are many referents. Perhaps Irish people would find it more accessible, at least if they know their history well. Here, we have something of a *coup d'écriture*, with many signs of the ruse of the artist. The text is presented in an apparent naïveté — like Clarice's "Sunday, before falling asleep" — but nothing is more condensed, or more allusive. It is already a cosmos.

Joyce denied using psychoanalysis in his work, yet he was impregnated by it. It is as if Joyce, though writing when Freud's texts were not yet well known, was in a kind of intellectual echo with him.

The story of *A Portrait of the Artist* is both that of a portrait being made and that of a finished portrait. The title indicates this kind of permanent duplicity. The reader is told that it is the portrait of an artist, not of a young man, which raises the question of the self-portrait of the artist, of the coming and going of the look, of the self, of the mirror and the self in the mirror.

A Portrait of the Artist is a genesis, like Clarice's text. But hers was a genesis as much of the artist as of the world, and the artist-world relation went through that of father-daughter. In *Portrait of the Artist*, one first sees a series of births, inscribed through the motif of evasion, of flight, and that is how the artist is made. The first and the fifth chapters resemble each other most. In those chapters, writing is much more disseminated, dislocated, than in the others. The successive stories of birth are stories of the breaking of an eggshell, in relation with a parental structure. In the first scene, there is a kind of elementary kinship structure. The scene opens little by little. In this story of the eye and of birds, not the real but the symbolic father marks the artist as genetic parent.

The text begins with an enormous *O* that recurs in the first pages. It can be taken as a feminine, masculine, or neuter sign, as zero. The *o* is everywhere. One can work on the *o-a*, on the *fort-da*. I insist on the graphic and phonic *o*'s because the text tells me to do so. With all its italics and its typography, the text asks the reader to listen. There is also a series of poems. The last one, with its system of inversions and inclusions and exclusions, ends in an apotheosis with "apologise."

In these two pages we have everything needed to make a world and its history, in particular that of the artist. The text begins with: "Once upon a time . . . baby tuckoo" (3). We are in the animal world. *I* begins with a moocow. Daedalus constructed his maze not without relation to a cow. It was built to contain the Minotaurus, the child of a (false) cow. We are in the labyrinth. There is no sexual hesitation and the first structure puts Oedipus in place. A cow and a little boy form a dual structure. We go on rapidly to the formation of the subject through the intervention of a third term. We go through the history of the mirror stage and of the cleavage, which is much funnier in Joyce than in Lacan.

In "His father told him that story:" the colon and the organization of the sentence are important since they speak at all levels. "His father looked at him