

DIS/ERUPTION: HÉLÈNE CIXOUS'S *ÉCRITURE FÉMININE* AND THE RHETORIC OF MATERIAL IDEALISM

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Born to Jewish parents in Oran, Algeria, Hélène Cixous was raised under the colonial rule of the French. With her rich family heritage and quasi-nomadic existence beginning in the 1940s, Cixous learned Spanish, German, Hebrew, Arabic, French, and English. With such a strong linguistic background, it is no wonder that language is the foundation for Cixous's work. Cixous's academic maturation occurred in the late 1960s – a time of change and challenge within the academy. The tone of her work echoes the political and academic tension of the time. The Revolt of May 1968 became a violent confrontation between students and the university, workers and the government. Verena Conley, in her book *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, records how an intellectual turmoil paralleled the political ferment. It was the time of:

«the advent of the human sciences, and reading in philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, linguistics. It is a period of belief in the *revolutionary power of language and of hope for a shattering of millenary oppressive structures*. Women want their share. [...] They read new theoretical works in and about major discourses governing society in an effort to determine how and where women have been excluded and *how to question and undo that exclusion*»¹ (emphasis added).

The «oppressive structures» which Conley highlights are those political and educational structures in power which are exclusionary by nature and, therefore, function to re-/oppress those who are considered marginal in society. These structures are patriarchal, containing knowledge and power in a manner

1. CONLEY, Verena Andermatt: *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1984, p. 3.

which culturally comes back to men. The transmission of this knowledge/power² is what Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément call mastery.

Examining exclusions from the oppressive structures as well as the possible escape from and subordination of the traditional, patriarchal structures –of mastery– are predominant concerns in Cixous’s work. Using her own theory of feminine writing –*écriture féminine*– Cixous opposes the traditional, patriarchal forms of writing. She argues that binaries –Sun/Moon, Culture/Nature, Logic/Passion, Active/Passive– can be traced back to the root binary: Man/Woman. She calls for women to subvert binary oppositions by writing their bodies as texts into existence, and ultimately writing a new history. The process of writing is disruptive in content as well as form and eruptive in regards to the relationship between the body of the woman, feminine sexuality, and the body of the text.

In this paper I will first explore Cixous’s theory of *écriture féminine* as it is juxtaposed to the discourse of mastery. By defining mastery in terms of knowledge/power, Hélène Cixous recognizes mastery as a discourse within which she can operate yet prefers a «feminine» discourse; by refusing genre and «linear» rhetoric, she is ultimately refusing mastery. Second, I will discuss how *écriture féminine* is a disruption of mastery, specifically on the linguistic level. Here, I will use Saussure to shed light on Cixous’s linguistic disruption and how this translates into a social disruption, specifically in terms of appropriating culturally constructed images. Third, I will examine the utopian call for a new woman and new history.³ In this section I will address previous repressed women –the sorceress, possessed, and hysteric– and how they were contained by mastery. Specifically, I will look at Freud’s Dora, her expression of desire for escape and disruption of societal structures and how Cixous synthesizes this in her play *Portrait of Dora*. And finally, I will assert that this escape from mastery via writing situates Cixous not as an idealist. Cixous intervenes on the level of thought and writing, but sees the language itself as material, body. Her operation in both the material and ideal I will call material idealism.

2. The punctuation of this word is my choice; however, in *The Newly Born Woman*, Clément uses the phrase «power-knowledge» (*The Newly Born Woman*, Trans. Betsy Wing. *Theory and History of Literature*, Volume 24, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 140).

3. For discussion of history, please see: HEGEL, G.W.L.: *Introduction to «The Philosophy of History»*, Leo Rauch (trans), Indianapolis, Hackett, 1988. Rooted in Hegel, the notion of history is perceived to be objective, like mastery. Hegel, when discussing original history, describes how the «historians primarily describe the actions, events, and situations they themselves have witnessed» (*Ibid.*, p. 3). Hegel seems to, on some level, recognize the subjectivity in authorship, suggesting that the goals of the author are the topic of his history, p.4. Yet even though the historian is individual and subjective, he is seen to be able to fully represent, be objective, pp.5-6. Hegel’s notion of history is exclusionary. For women to refuse mastery, they must write a new history, a woman’s history – a collection of events, actions, and situations that includes women, refuses repression, and functions not in one, hegemonic, patriarchal discourse, but rather multiplicitously.

1. ÉCRITURE FÉMININE: AGAINST MASTERY

To fully explore Cixous's *écriture féminine*, I must first examine the role of mastery as that which transmits knowledge and power. In the Lacanian sense, the master has knowledge and power, possesses and contains knowledge/power, and, therefore, makes it the primary means for transmitting both knowledge and power. In conversation with Cixous as transcribed in *The Newly Born Woman*, Clément states:

«[discourse of mastery] refers to a relationship between mastery and the university, which is such that the master's discourse – from the point of view of its political and economic power – is transferred onto and shapes any discourse dealing with knowledge to be transmitted».⁴

Cixous extends Clément's notion of mastery this to transmit not only knowledge but also power. She finds mastery to be limiting, exclusionary. While Cixous uses mastery, she does not limit herself to it. In *The Newly Born Woman*, she declares:

«I use rhetorical discourse, the discourse of mastery, orally, for example, with my students, and obviously I do it on purpose; it is a refusal on my part to leave organized discourse entirely in men's power. I never fell for that sort of bait».⁵

Cixous can participate in traditional rhetorical discourse, in mastery. However, she is wary of participating solely within mastery and, therefore, submitting to and reaffirming its dominance.

Cixous's refusal to operate solely within mastery is contested by material-feminist Catherine Clément. For Clément, mastery is necessary because it is used to access and transmit knowledge; mastery is *the* rhetorical discourse. One cannot communicate effectively without it; mastery ensures transmission of knowledge.⁶ Clément states:

«[...]for me mastery is fundamental and necessary. I don't particularly think one can transmit certain knowledges – *the* knowledges – except through mastery».⁷

For Clément, mastery is the basis for effective communication. Mastery, for Cixous, is not fundamental or necessary but rather makes knowledge «still more inaccessible, makes it sacred»⁸ and involves repression. For Cixous, mastery is a trickster; it creates the illusion of accessibility, for it is only accessible to those who «already have a relationship with mastery».⁹ She also refers to mastery as *L'Empire du Propre*¹⁰ –translated variously as The Empire of Appropriation or

4. CIXOUS, Hélène and Catherine CLÉMENT: *The Newly Born Woman*, Trans Betsy Wing. *Theory and History of Literature*, Volume 24, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 137.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

9. *Ibid.*,

10. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

The Empire of the Self-Same. The implication here is property, hegemony, the elimination or at least appropriation and containment of the other.¹¹

Mastery is like the phallus in the sense that both function to set, contain, and perpetuate established signifiers. As such, they are nothing and everything. The phallus –a signifier with numerous (innumerable?) signifieds– establishes meaning as a pattern of signifieds, contains that meaning, and perpetuates that meaning with constructed inflexibility. Like the phallus, mastery –as that which possesses, contains, and transmits knowledge/power– establishes, contains, and perpetuates meaning. One cannot see or describe either the phallus or mastery, only representations of them. Mastery, like the phallus, does not exist and it permeates all existence. To pursue feminine discourse, one must escape mastery, and, according to Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine*, the act of writing becomes the means of escape and consequently dis/rupt established grouping and arrangement of signifiers.

Not only does mastery establish signifiers but also situates how they are packaged and communicated. As a discourse, mastery produces a type of rhetoric (linear) and constructs genre distinction. Since the discourse of mastery is objective –an objectivity that is an epistemological, rhetorical mode through which patriarchy is maintained– for Cixous to use other, multiple rhetorical modes, is for her to deny mastery. When Cixous writes, she refuses mastery by rejecting standard rhetorical forms of genre and linearity of the argument.

Cixous prefers a feminine discourse over mastery, which is based on the woman's libidinal organization –disruptive, eruptive, volcanic, which is the kind of writing that belongs to the newly born woman, the woman born through her own act of writing herself into existence. Cixous refuses mastery by refusing traditional, patriarchal rhetorical expectations of a linear argument. In «The Laugh of the Medusa,» the call for women to write themselves occurs in at least four different places, making it difficult for a reader used to the traditional, patriarchal, linear discourse.¹² Indeed, Cixous composes what Moi calls a «dense web of signifiers».¹³ This structure is certainly not what is expected in a traditional rhetoric with a linear argument. Cixous's argument is a web that cannot be contained, separated thread by thread and laid out in a linear fashion. Cixous denies her reader that ability. Rather, she utilizes *écriture féminine*.

Not only does she deny the expectation for linear argumentation, but Cixous also refuses genre. Susan Suleiman, in her introduction of «*Coming to Writing*» and *Other Essays* entitled «Writing Past the Wall,» explores Cixous style:

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11. Cixous's ability to refuse such mastery can be seen in her text *The Book of Promethea*. Here, she inverts the classical mythological character's gender, refuses plot, and disallows an omniscient narrator. For more on mastery, read Cixous and Clément's discussion of Kalfka's «Before the Law» found in *Newly Born Woman*, Op. cit.
 12. CIXOUS, Hélène: «The Laugh of the Medusa», in Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (ed.): *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, Boston, Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2001 (2nd ed.), pp. 1524, 1525, 1527, 1533.
 13. MOI, Toril: «Hélène Cixous: An Imaginary Utopia», in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, London, Methuen, 1985, p.103.

«Is this poetry? Critical commentary? Autobiography? Ethical reflection? Feminist theory? Yes. One wall these texts most definitely get past is the wall of genres».¹⁴

Cixous's manifesto «The Laugh of the Medusa» is a theoretical text using poetic language. Her first novel *Inside* is a fiction using autobiographical information. By allowing autobiographic information in her «fiction», she effectively refused genre as a patriarchal linguistic structure. This lack of classification is problematic to some audiences. Yet this conflation is essential to disruption. Conley describes:

«For Cixous, all writing is necessarily 'autobiographical,' and in each text there are unconscious dimensions».¹⁵

All that has been repressed must be expressed through *écriture féminine* for the newly born woman.

2. ÉCRITURE FÉMININE: DIS/ERUPTION

It is important to observe Cixous's use of language as she seeks to disrupt the social structure by first disrupting linguistic structure. The significance of this disruption of linguistic form can best be understood through Saussure's understanding of language as a system of signs which are arbitrarily constructed. Language, as something culturally constructed, reflects the ideology of the society in which it is used.

Similarly significant are denotative and connotative meaning of words. Associative relations function on the level of the individual as well as collective. While each person has a unique set of associative relations¹⁶, some words are said with an expected connotation¹⁷. Larger cultural/societal constructs are at work in language and influence denotative and connotative meaning. Thus, it is possible to have collective associative relations. As Saussure puts it:

«A particular work is like the center of a constellation; it is the point of convergence of an indefinite number of co-ordinated terms».¹⁸

The depth and significance of language is why linguistic structures are the site for Cixous disruption. She is trying to write a new history, a woman's his-

14. SULEIMAN, Susan Rubin: Introduction to «*Coming to Writing*» and *Other Essays*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1991, p. XI.

15. CONLEY, Verena Andermatt: *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine...*, op. cit., p. 12.

16. For example, when someone hears the word «tree,» that person may picture an aspen while someone else may picture a pine. Different odors, emotions, and thoughts may be linked to one particular tree for the hearer/reader.

17. For example, in Western society, the snake is not just a reptile; it is associated with evil, poison, and the Fall of Man.

18. SAUSSURE, Ferdinand de: *Course in General Linguistics*, Wade Basken (trans), New York, McGraw-Hill Book Co, [1913] 1966, p. 126.

tory; she is trying to reshape constellations.¹⁹ By referencing frequently used connotative meanings and reassigning significance to them, Cixous is disrupting language and making way for societal change. Kristeva too recognizes the connection between language and the body. The body is encompassed by the signifying process.²⁰ Kristeva postulates that the text is a «practice that could be compared to political revolution and the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society».²¹ Yet the relation is more than mere similarity but rather a necessary combination. She continues:

«The history and political experience of the twentieth century have demonstrated that one cannot be transformed without the other».²²

The body must be written into a new set of signifiers and associative relations as an act of revolution.

If language is representative of the societal structure, then certainly it is an appropriate and necessary starting place for Cixous's desired disruption; in fact, language is the key to this disruption. Verena Conley recognizes Cixous's disturbance of linguistic structure as both necessary and fundamental for societal change. In her book *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, Conley states:

«Language, far from being an atemporal tool, is inextricably linked to history and society. Its structures define and constitute the subject. There are no absolute, immutable values beyond words or the grammar and syntax that order them. To change existing social structures, the linguistic clichés that purvey them and make them appear as transparent, immutable truths must be detected, re-marked, displaced».²³

Society constructs language; it develops out of a cultural context which establishes the subject as well as the relation of signifier and signified. Since there is nothing that exists outside of a relationship to linguistic structures, language is the site for disruption. For societal change to occur, linguistic structures must be addressed and reinscribed. The connection between linguistic and societal structures cannot be over-emphasized.

3. ÉCRITURE FÉMININE: MEANS OF ESCAPING MASTERY AND BECOMING A NEWLY BORN WOMAN

The body, also constructed by culture, has been inscribed by society and given signification. Therefore, not only do linguistic structures need to be ad-

19. Interestingly, Athena, the goddess who ordered Medusa's decapitation, made Perseus into a constellation upon his death. Saussure's simile of the constellation, then, may be interpreted in terms of linguistic structures as well as the social structures and established images produced by mastery.

20. For more on material body and signification, cf. GALLENGER, Catherine: «The Potato In the Materialist Imagination», in Catherine Gallenger and Stephen Greenblatt: *Practicing New Historicism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 110-135.

21. KRISTEVA, Julia: «Revolution in Poetic Language», in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (ed.): *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, Blackwell Pub, 1998, p. 452.

22. Ibid., p. 452.

23. CONLEY, Verena Andermatt: *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine...*, Op. cit., p. 4.

dressed but also bodily constructs. Verena Conley speaks of the constructs within language and its consequential importance in terms of the body:

«Everything is language, and the body is always written, never a 'natural' body. The (political) economy of masculinity and femininity is organized by different needs and constraints which, when they become socialized and metaphorized, produce signs, relations of power and production, a whole immense system of cultural inscription».²⁴

The body is a site for cultural inscription and is consequently another element that must be written.

Writing as an escape is the means for a new assigning of signification to the body. Francesco Pontuale, in «The Awakening: Struggles toward l'écriture féminine,» discusses Cixous's connection between writing and the body:

«According to Cixous the female body and female sexuality have been negated and repressed by centuries of male power. For her, a recuperation of the female body is, in fact, the main source of *écriture féminine*. She argues that the relationship between feminine writing and female body lies in the heterogeneity and multiplicity of female sexuality».²⁵

In contrast to male sexuality, which tends to be more «monolithic, focused on the penis,» the female body is «endowed with a greater number of erogenous zones than man's: lips, breasts, vagina, clitoris»²⁶. Writing the female body is, therefore, structured by an eruption of feminine sexuality. Thus, in addition to refusing genre, grammar, and syntax, she rejects various masculine, patriarchal linguistic structures. In writing the female body as structured by the eruption of feminine sexuality, she refuses various masculine, patriarchal linguistic structures. Cixous writes a new self, free of patriarchal signification.

Feminine writing is the birthing of the new woman, the process of which Cixous describes in her essay «Coming to Writing.» While she calls for a new woman, she recollects when she did not recognize the illusion of mastery:

«For years I aspired to this divine homogeneity. I was there with my big pair of scissors, and as soon as I saw myself overlapping, snip, I cut, I adjusted, I reduced everything to a personage known as 'a proper woman'».²⁷

She was suppressing all that did not fit in a patriarchal discourse. Yet the suppression could not be sustained. She later states:

«I was on the verge of becoming one-self. But, as I have since come to know, the repressed returns».²⁸

24. Ibid., 57.

25. PONTUALE, Francesco: «The Awakening: Struggles Toward L'Écriture Féminine», *Mississippi Quarterly*, 50:1 (1997), p. 37.

26. Ibid., p. 37.

27. CIXOUS, Hélène. «Coming to Writing», in Deborah Jenson (ed.): *«Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1991, p. 30.

28. Ibid., p. 30.

The cutting, the conforming, the willingness to subside must cease; the repressed will inevitably resurface. For Freud and Lacan, and I would argue mastery, women are defined by lack. Thus, the appropriation of the Medusa image is significant. A decapitated Medusa is a signified of the phallus and mastery signifiers. She is the monster-woman whose containment in patriarchy is death. There is no space for her. Yet a fully intact Medusa only evokes the fear of castration for those participating in mastery. In feminine discourse, she can be the incorporated other. The image of a laughing, intact Medusa is a signified not of the phallus or mastery, but rather the rebirth of the new woman. This resurfacing of the repressed which Cixous describes is evidenced by those groups that have been marginalized –specifically the sorceress, possessed, and hysteric.

Previously, women's inability to conform and suppress resurfaced as it did with Cixous, as it always does; yet this disruption was contained by mastery and labeled. The labels changed throughout time, but the message was the same –this woman does not fit; she must be contained. Clément traces this lineage of the rebellion of repressed women from the sorceress through the possessed to the hysteric.

The sorceress, possessed, and hysteric are all women who «acted out» in their respective cultural contexts. The sorceress lives in the forest and is seen in opposition to the Church. Clément describes Michelet's conception of the sorceress as a «woman finding her autonomy in the satanic dependency of a 'counter-culture,' a cultural backlash».²⁹ She is externally bound, kept from the town and in the forest. She must be excluded. The possessed lives in the convent and is seen in opposition to the Church. Recorded by anthropologists and sociologists, she is externally bound by handcuffs and encircled by people watching the exorcism. She must be reformed. The hysteric is also set in opposition to society, but she is bound internally by her symptoms. She is confined to the analyst's room, specifically the couch. She must be rehabilitated.

Notice the external space for women contracts. The sorceress is given the forest; the possessed is given the space of death or exorcism, coffin or convent; the hysteric is given the psychoanalyst's room, couch. Thus, when Cixous writes of the contemporary repressed woman, there is ultimately no space for her, which is why she must create space in the writing of her body. Mastery cannot suppress indefinitely. A woman cannot fulfill the role depicted by society. Thus, she gives birth; writes; creates text through her body of text.

The woman must write.³⁰ Addressing an audience of women, Cixous begins:

«Writing –begins–, without you, without I, without law, without knowing, without light, without hope, without bonds, without anyone close *to* you, for if a world history goes on, you are not in it, you are 'in' 'hell,' and hell is where I am not

29. CIXOUS, Hélène and Catherine CLÉMENT: Op. cit., p. 4.

30. Cixous' essay *Coming to Writing* describes this necessity.

but where what is me, although I have no place, feels itself dying again through all time, where not-me drags me further and further from me, and where what is left of me is nothing more than suffering without myself [...] me empties myself, and yet, heavier and heavier, you sink down, you bottom-out in the abyss of nonrapport». ³¹

Writing must first begin with absence; Cixous defines the abyss by what is not there, what the woman is without. «Without law, without knowing.» A new history cannot be created from the past/previous patriarchal structure. It must refuse it completely, deny its existence.

The writer then experiences death. A «world history» may continue, but the writer is absent from it. She is in the abyss. She is there «without skin, inundated with otherness.» Here, her body is «without borders, [...] without armies, without mastery» ³². From the emptiness and silence of the abyss springs sound:

«[I]t's in these breathless times that writings traverse you, song of an unheard-of purity flow through you, addressed to no one, they well up, surge forth, from the throats of your unknown inhabitants, these are the cries that death and life hurl in their combat». ³³

The abyss, then, is the fertile ground for a new linguistic structure. The violent combat of life and death as well as the reference to boundaries and armies echoes the violence that commonly precedes fictional utopias –a topic to which I will return. Out of nothing comes song and laughter. Writing must be a denial and escape from material reality and create a new material –her own body, her own text– for that reality to change. Women must then create this new space, a textual space. This escape is a move toward the revolution required for utopia, as I will discuss in the next section.

While Cixous exhorts writing as necessary, she does not negate its difficulty:

«Everything in me joined forces to forbid me to write: History, my story, my origin, my sex. Everything that constituted my social and cultural self». ³⁴

The social and cultural conditions in which she lived, prescribed by mastery, did not have a space for her writing. As such, she had to create the space, fight beyond the restricting forces. She had to break through all the walls of restriction by searching deep inside herself and erupting. This inevitably incorporates death. Cixous writes:

«I am dead. There is an abyss. The leap. That *Someone* takes. Then, a gestation of self–in itself, atrocious. When the flesh tears, writhes, rips apart, decomposes, revives, recognizes itself as a newly born woman, there is a suffering that no text is

31. CIXOUS, Hélène and Catherine CLEMENT: Op. cit., p. 38.

32. Ibid., p. 39.

33. Ibid.,

34. Ibid., p. 12.

gentle or powerful enough to accompany with a song. Which is why, while she is dying –then being born– silence».³⁵

But death to mastery is necessary. Without it, there is no escape. Cixous continues:

«Without it –my death– I wouldn't have written. Wouldn't have torn the veil from my throat».³⁶

Within the silence of the abyss –a non-space of absence– the woman escapes the boundaries of mastery and is able, for the first time, to speak, to express herself without mastery's filter or containment. This resurrection from this death takes place via laughter³⁷:

«One can emerge from death, I believe, only with an irrepressible burst of laughter. [...] In the beginning, there can be only dying, the abyss, and the first laugh».³⁸

Through laughter as resurrection, women re-enter the world anew and effectively write woman's history via the text. Writing must occur. It is fundamental to the self-expression necessary to formulate change. Cixous states:

«Ourselves in writing like fish in the water, like meanings in our tongues, and the transformation in our unconscious lives».³⁹

In this newly created space (the text), women are freed from repression via expression. The newly born woman deals with her repression from patriarchal society through writing and, in turn, appropriates associative relations, dis-/erupting the social structure.

Yet the possibility for this dis-/eruption is debated. Unpacking *The Newly Born Woman* will allow for an exploration of the materialist and idealist approaches to feminist issues through contrasts seen between the two French writers.⁴⁰ A well-marked entrance into the division between the idealist and the materialist perspectives on language and writing is Cixous's and Clément's

35. Ibid., p. 36.

36. Ibid.

37. For further discussion of the significance of laughter, cf. CONLEY, Verena: Op. cit., p. 17.

38. CIXOUS, Hélène and Catherine CLÉMENT: Op. cit., p. 41.

39. Ibid., p. 58.

40. For more on this discussion, see MARX, Karl and Friedrich ENGELS: «The German Ideology: Part I», in Robert C. Tucker (ed.): *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York, W.W. Norton and Co, [1846] 1978 (2nd ed.), pp. 146-200. The feminist extension of this discussion can be found within: NEWTON, Judith and Deborah ROSENFELT: *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, New York, Methuen, 1985. As described by Marx and Engels, idealism privileges consciousness over the material physical conditions in which they occur, whereas materialism argues that those physical conditions are constitutive of thought. In *The German Ideology*, one can see materialism privileged: «Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life» (ibid., p. 155). A prominent example of this is material-feminists, such as Newton and Rosenfelt, who are careful to not merely examine «gender ideology and relations along but also in terms of class and race ideologies, class and race relations», (ibid., p. XXVI). The concept of a sisterhood among women is problematic for the material-feminist because it ignores material differences, such as class and race, between women. Cixous embodies

psychoanalytic discussion. In regards to Freud's *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Cixous and Clément vary in their views of the societal effect of Dora.⁴¹ These two French feminists –both well versed in psychoanalytic discourse– explore this conflict in their co-authored book *The Newly Born Woman*.

Cixous and Clément agree that Dora is situated within patriarchy, that her father, Herr K, and Freud himself are in the place of mastery, controlling the transmission of knowledge and power. What is disputed, however, is Dora's effect on this structure. For Clément, Dora's fits, her disruption is limited to her immediate experience. Clément's materialist argument is that Dora's effect is limited. No change occurs other than in her immediate relationships. Indeed, within these relationships, the disturbance is «always reclosable, always re-closed».⁴² Dora may create disruption, but it is limited to the confines of her own experience. If Dora broke anything, Clément continues, «[w]hat she broke was strictly individual and limited».⁴³ Jane Gallop expresses Clément's reactions, explaining:

«The family assimilates her otherness, and like an amoeba, finds its single cell revitalized, stronger than before».⁴⁴

Ultimately, Clément asserts that real change cannot happen on the level of 'language'.⁴⁵ Dora's resistance and disruptions were limited. She did nothing for women in general, as a whole; the text remains medical; her resistance was pathologized. She may have caused waves, but they calmed back down,

the idealist perspective, not only in terms of *what* she writes (content) but also *how* she writes (structure and style). Yet she calls for a writing of the female body, material in nature. It is from this material resource that the ideal is made possible.

41. FREUD, Sigmund: *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1963. In this text, Freud addresses the hysteria of an eighteen-year-old girl who is «handed over» by her father to psychotherapeutic treatment (ibid., p. 13). Through various means of gathering information (personal experience, Dora's testimony, the testimony of her father and Herr K), Freud discovered that Dora was interwoven into a dysfunctional set of relations – her mother was an obsolete figure, her father had intimate exchanges with Frau K who was friends with Dora and whose husband made advances toward Dora. Through her coughing fits, fainting, and verbally expressed frustration, Dora received attention from her objects of desire and put a strain on their relationships – refusing to accept the roles being defined for her. Upon receiving two separate advances from Herr K and denying both (in the bedroom and by the lake), Dora expressed the feeling of being exchanged. Her father and Herr K were swapping their women; Frau K was given to Dora's father without a fuss as long as Herr K received Dora in return. Yet she refused the advances of Herr K, who Freud describes as «quite young and of prepossessing appearance» (ibid., p. 22). Freud, shocked at Dora's refusals states: «This was surely just the situation to call up a distinct feeling of sexual excitement in a girl of fourteen who had never before been approached» (ibid., p. 21). Freud's shock from Dora's actions and his framing of her refusal as abnormal and an additional symptom of hysteria exposes his position in mastery.

42. CIXOUS, Hélène and Catherine CLÉMENT: Op. cit., p. 156.

43. Ibid., p. 157.

44. GALLOP, Jane: «Keys to Dora», in *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1982, p. 133.

45. CIXOUS, Hélène and Catherine CLÉMENT: Op. cit., p. 157.

stilled with no lasting effect; language cannot bring about material change in the world.

Conversely, Hélène Cixous does not see Dora's effect as limited but rather as revolutionary. Cixous's refutes:

«Dora broke something. [...] She is the name of a certain force, which makes the little circus not work anymore».⁴⁶

Though Dora was still pathologized, she disrupted mastery. She may have been reduced to a medical text, but her story was preserved and may be viewed as an event in women's history. But she cannot be seen solely through the eyes of the analyst. As Cixous seeks to represent femininity in a way that does not constantly recall masculine logic, she addresses Freud's work on Dora and writes a new history.

A more thorough articulation of Cixous's view of the role and effect of Dora can be found in her 1979 play *Portrait of Dora*. In this text, Cixous recreates Dora's dysfunctional situation. But, instead of Freud being the central character around which the action happens, as in his case-study, Cixous places Dora in the center of the text. The dialogue between Freud and Dora still occurs in the analysts room, but it traverses both time and space via Dora's recollections.

In *Portrait*, the men are no longer the nucleus around which the women are attached. As documented by Freud, Dora dismissed her analyst, walked out of his office two weeks after she had decided to do so. Dora inverted the prescribed roles. She treated Freud, and Herr K via transference⁴⁷, as a governess and dismissed him/them⁴⁸. This disruption is precisely what Cixous seeks when she calls women to write their bodies. Cixous's writing of *Portrait*, in the nature of *écriture féminine*, is therefore participating in this new history. Cixous links herself to Dora's story and rewrites her narrative in *Portrait*. The process of a new history has begun. Dora's story may be singular, but her situation is an event within woman's history.⁴⁹ Her story is given significance in light of the lineage of other women's repression, such as the sorceress, possessed, and the newly born woman.

46. Ibid., p. 157.

47. For a definition of terms, cf. YOUNG-BRUEHL, Elizabeth: Introduction to *Freud on Women*, New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 1990. Transference and counter-transference also play a significant role in this case-history. On some level, Freud recognized that he was not a pure, objective observer, that he, in fact, contributed and influenced the treatment process. However, he still gave her the label of hysteric and perpetuated the hegemony of patriarchy.

48. GALLOP, Jane: «Keys to Dora», op. cit., p. 142.

49. Jane Gallop connects Dora, Cixous, and all women by observing the cover and title page contain the following three lines: «*Portrait de Dora/ de Hélène Cixous/ des femmes*.» Gallop writes: «The unusual inclusion of a 'de' before the author's name works to draw the heroine Dora, the author, Hélène Cixous, as well as the press's name [*des femmes*] that is 'women', into a circuit of substitution embodied in the grammatical structure of apposition. The portrait of Dora is also the Portrait of Hélène Cixous is also a portrait of women (in general)» (cf. GALLOP, Jane: Op. cit., p. 132).

This kind of narrative rereading is important if not necessary, according to Teresa de Lauretis:

«For feminist theory in particular, the interest in narrativity amounts to a *theoretical return* to narrative and the posing of questions that have been either preempted or displaced by semiotic studies. That return amounts, as is often the case with any radical critique, to a rereading of the sacred texts against the passionate urging of a different question, a different practice, and a different desire».⁵⁰

For Cixous, the difference Teresa de Lauretis calls for as part of the narrative rereading would be based in femininity. Teresa de Lauretis goes on to discuss, by tracing the work of Barthes and Scholes, the link between narrative and sexual intercourse which «affirms, in manner of a *reductio ad absurdum*, what seems to be the inherent maleness of all narrative movement».⁵¹ What is exposed by the work of these scholars is that not only does the narrative structure underlie literature as well as history, but it is possessed and informed by the elevated element of the root binary structure –Man. Indeed, women must write their bodies –the bodies that have been culturally inscribed by mastery– into a new, feminine discourse. In this new discourse, traditional signification within narrative is undone, obliterated.

The «inherent maleness» described by de Lauretis is evident in Freud's *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* which is necessarily re-appropriated by Hélène Cixous's play *Portrait of Dora*. By using what Conley describes as a «feminine angle», Cixous rewrites the history of Dora, in the same way she rewrites Medusa (changing corporate associative relations), which, in turn, enables her to rewrite history in the way she calls for in «The Laugh of the Medusa» and all of her work in general. Thus, Cixous is ultimately able to write a new history from the feminine angle. In *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous states:

«All you have to do to see the Medusa is look at her in the face and she isn't deadly. She is beautiful and she laughs».⁵²

Thus, for Cixous, «[...]this is a high point in the history of women».⁵³ With this revision of narrative, Cixous simultaneously writes a new history, woman's history. Cixous uses *écriture féminine* to combat mastery as one in the Oppositional Tradition by refusing to write within its delimitations and by accessing the eruption of feminine sexuality.

4. ÉCRITURE FÉMININE: MATERIAL IDEALISM

Hélène Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine* juxtaposes and dis/rupts mastery. Mastery, as hegemonic and patriarchal, inscribes meaning to language as well

50. DE LAURETIS, Teresa: «Desire in Narrative», in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University, 1984, p. 107.

51. Ibid., p. 108.

52. CIXOUS, Hélène and Catherine CLÉMENT: Op. cit., p. 130.

53. Ibid., p. 160.

as the body. Mastery, then, must be rejected by refusing these significations and creating a new system of signs via the newly born woman. While Cixous's call for women to be newly born is utopian, the writing of the body is material in nature. It requires something to write with, something to write on, and a body. Thus, the text in human form becomes text in written form and the latter enables birth. Women must die to the boundaries of patriarchy, laugh themselves into rebirth, and write a new history, a woman's history.

Sandra Gilbert, in her introduction to *The Newly Born Woman*, discusses the new place for the new woman:

«[T]he newborn woman, transcending the heresies of history and the history of hysteria, must fly/flee into a new heaven and a new earth of her own invention».⁵⁴

This is a place that cannot be found in contemporary culture. Society is still structured around mastery. Cixous's call to write is simultaneously a call to revolution as characteristic of utopian development.

The societal change that Cixous calls for is utopian in the sense that it is not here and now. Utopia⁵⁵ is most often viewed as another place and time; birth occurs in the abyss. The term was coined by Thomas More's *Utopia* as a no-place. For More, this no place was an island. For Cixous, the no-place would be written. The space would be the text itself. It would be brought about with human effort, specifically women who are newly born via *écriture féminine*. In this newly created space, the body would not be inscribed by mastery, but could have a new way of being represented and articulated in the world.⁵⁶

This utopian notion of writing as escape has been critiqued as unrealistic and therefore inapplicable. Toril Moi describes the anti-utopian argument as illogical and inconsistent. However, gaps and contradictions exist in utopia only from the perspective of the system it seeks to escape. Problems of/within utopian discourse are justified—they seek to change the current social structure and, therefore, are under no obligation to adhere to it.

Others scholars too have rejected Cixous's utopian quality. Ann Rosalind Jones critiques the work of French feminists, especially Cixous's writing as that which «reverses the values assigned to each side of the polarity, but it leaves men as the determining referent, not departing from the male/female, but participating in it»⁵⁷. But, Cixous's apparent revalorizing of traits usually on the subjugated half of the binary pair functions to expose the arbitrary construction of the valued entities within the binary. Similarly, Toril Moi critiques Cixous's apparent hypocrisy—adhering to some polarities⁵⁸ and negating others. But by

54. GILBERT, Sandra M.: Introduction to *The Newly Born Woman*, Op. cit., p. XIV.

55. For a further discussion of utopia, refer to articles by Sargent regarding typology and history of the genre as well as Schaer regarding the function and components of utopia.

56. This argument is influenced by the Frankfurt School Theorists.

57. JONES, Ann: «Toward an Understanding of l'écriture Féminine», in Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (ed.): *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 93.

58. Such as keeping the masculine/feminine binary by qualifying writing as one or the other.

effectively inverting what is privileged and randomly adhering to or neglecting binaries, Cixous exposes that these binary oppositions are constructed, and arbitrarily at that. She manipulates and destabilizes the boundaries, moving outside of them and, ultimately, escaping from them.

Cixous, in her pursuit of escape via writing, participates in what Robert Con Davis terms the Oppositional Tradition. Davis highlights Cixous's goal to expose and dismantle patriarchal structure. Davis supports Cixous in her theoretical endeavors by suggesting she participates in the Oppositional Tradition, which Davis defines as a tradition that:

«formulates specific strategies for thinking about what it means for one idea to oppose another, what is required to effect change in cultural relations, and at what point opposition can become neutralized and then appropriated by its 'opposition'». ⁵⁹

Placing her in a lineage with the Pre-Socratics, Aristotle, Hegel, Marx, Edward Said, Fredrick Jameson, and others, Davis sets Cixous up as one who intentionally chooses to confront dominant cultural practices so as to «understand and change the prevailing order». ⁶⁰ Cixous is confrontational through her style of feminine writing, which refuses patriarchal structures of grammar and genre. By transcending mastery's boundaries, she creates an escape so as to live beyond what is prescribed by patriarchy.

The materialist seems to overlook the effect, small as it may be, that consciousness has on material conditions. Dora, for example, may not have prevented Freud from keeping his role of psychoanalyst and, in turn, pathologized her resistance. However, her resistance disrupted the structure; she walked out on Freud, not allowing him to complete his work as he saw fit. She escaped the totality of his analysis. And, when viewed from a woman's history, she is a forerunner for the newly born woman. History and materiality may be approached from Marx and Engels who discuss men as distinguishing themselves from animals by their means of production (modifying the natural base), which is:

«conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life». ⁶¹

Yet, women are given no space, no geography or place of being, as seen in the lineage of the sorceress. For women, space is themselves. Their bodies are the material conditions which they must use to write their history.

Écriture féminine is seen as utopian and oppositional to tradition because of its linguistic disruption. Corporate/collective associative relations are what Cixous dismantles by *écriture féminine*. She calls for individuals to re-appropriate their associations. By portraying Medusa as laughing rather than decapitated by

59. Ibid., p. 275.

60. Ibid., p. 265.

61. MARX, Karl and Fredrick ENGELS: Op. cit., p. 150.

Perseus as myth depicts, Cixous dismisses the normative, corporate associative relations and re-appropriates the female image –intact. Medusa is a symbol of terror for men.⁶² Associated with Amazons, she represents women who are outside of patriarchy, who evoke fear. Thus, to incorporate her into narrative, which is transmitted via mastery, Medusa must be decapitated. Yet by presenting an alternative image of Medusa –not a monster, decapitated, and used as a weapon in battle, but a woman, whole, and laughing– Cixous disrupts mastery's transmission of the signifier/signified relationship of Medusa/terror. Medusa as a signifier is reassigned. While symbolic of a necessary social shift, the disruption must first occur in language.

62. For further discussion of Medusa's head as a «symbol of horror», see: YOUNG-BRUEHL: Op. cit., p. 270. Also, see: SMITH, J.C. and Carla J. FERSTMAN: «Medusa Depetrified», in *The Castration of Oedipus: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Will to Power*, New York, New York UP, 1996, pp. 232-258.