The Hélène Cixous Reader

This is the first truly representative selection of texts by Hélène Cixous. The substantial pieces range broadly across her entire oeuvre, and include essays, works of fiction, lectures and drama. Arranged helpfully in chronological order, the extracts span twenty years of intellectual thought and demonstrate clearly the development of one of the most creative and brilliant minds of the twentieth century.

The editor's introductions to each piece will be especially helpful to readers new to the writings of Hélène Cixous.

With a foreword by Jacques Derrida, a preface by Cixous herself, and first-class editorial material by Susan Sellers, *The Hélène Cixous Reader* is destined to become a key text of feminist writing.

Susan Sellers studied at the Universities of London and the Sorbonne and has taught in the Ecole Normale Supérieure, near Paris, and the University of Paris VIII. She has written extensively on the subject of feminist thought.

Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing, published in 1993, is Cixous' revised presentation of three lectures given in English at the University of California, Irvine, in May 1990, as part of their Wellek Library Lectures on Critical Theory. In the first of three extracts reprinted here, Cixous explains her frustration with the debate on sexual difference as this is currently conceived. Evoking her insistence in "Extreme Fidelity" that masculine and feminine modes of behavior are not tied to anatomy but derive from our response to life, she argues here for the complexity of gender. Only writing, Cixous suggests, can at present convey the truth about identity.

The passage is taken from pp. 50–2 of "The School of the Dead," the first of the three lectures in the series, in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. The text of *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* is edited by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers from an English transcript with French additions, and is substantially revised by Hélène Cixous.

It's only at the end – all of Ingeborg Bachmann's books are books about the end – she writes each time in agony – that everything we weren't able to say will be said. Not only is there a war between people, but this war is produced by sexual difference. And not just by sexual difference. By the wiles, paradoxes, and surprises that sexual difference reserves for us. This is why the man–woman conflict is insufficient for me, in my time, in my place. It *is* a question of sexual difference, only sexual difference isn't what we think it is. It's both tortuous and complicated. There is sexual difference, and there is what it becomes in its appearances and distributions in each one of us. We already knew it with Shakespeare: ourselves we do not owe and we do not know whom we love. Before the final hour we will not be able to say that such and such a woman was a man. Why can't we say it? Because it would be saying what the world is not yet ready to hear. Besides, it's dangerous, since we are on the way toward what could be retaken and distorted by misogyny. Let's imagine we love a woman who is a man inside. This means we love not a man exactly, but a woman who is a man, which is not quite the same thing: it's a woman who is also a man, another species. These complexities are not yet audible. Although this is true, strangely enough we are still today at a clear-cut difference, we continue to say man and woman even though it doesn't work. We are not made to reveal to what extent we are complex. We are not strong enough, not agile enough; only writing is able to do this. Sometimes we are married to a man because he is a woman, even though we believed we had married a man. Whom have we

married? Our grandmother perhaps. A woman who was the replica of a woman-eating man passed off in the world as a woman par excellence. In this guise she slaughtered women wholesale, while being extolled by men for her maternal charm. This is a true tale. We should write "The Fables of Sexual Difference." They should be the tales of our times; they would be staggering. The Greeks did it. In the Greek tragedies Aeschylus tells us right away that Clytemnestra is of virile strength. But then who kills Agamemnon? I'd like to know. Is it a man or a woman who kills Agamemnon? Does it mean that a woman who kills a man is a man, etc.? In other words, that only a man kills a man. But then why accuse Clytemnestra of being a woman? There's no end to it . . .

We could think over these mysteries but we don't. We are unable to inscribe or write them since we don't know who we are, something we never consider since we always take ourselves for ourselves; and from this point on we no longer know anything. I'll tell you frankly that I haven't the faintest idea who I am, but at least I know I don't know. I am not the other able to perceive me. I know some things about myself. I know who I'm not, I believe.

As for you, the other, I am where I think you are not who you believe yourself to be, who you seem to be, who the world believes you to be – I am using the second person to avoid the difficulty of speaking either in the masculine or the feminine – on the other hand, given that the definition of me or you is the most vulnerable thing in us, this prevents me from thinking what I think. When we say to a woman that she is a man or to a man that he is a woman, it's a terrible insult. This is why we cut one another's throats.

We have extremely strong identifications, which found our house. An identity card doesn't allow for confusion, torment, or bewilderment. It asserts the simplified and clear-cut images of conjugality. If the truth about loving or hateful choices were revealed it would break open the earth's crust. Which is why we live in legalized and general delusion. Fiction takes the place of reality. This is why simply naming one of these turns of the unconscious that are part of our strange human adventure engenders such upsets (which are at once intimate, individual, and political); why consciously or unconsciously we constantly try to save ourselves from this naming. The one whom a woman calls "husband," is he the father, the son, or the he-mother? The one who governs the country, is he father or son? The war that divides the world in two halves is a war between father and son, or else a war between the archaic father, i.e., a type of mother and the jealous son. And what about women?

In our impassioned times on all political fronts, where it is largely a question of an open and covert struggle with the mysteries of sexual difference, as women we are at the *obligatory* mercy of simplifications. In order to defend women we are obliged to speak in the feminist terms of "man" and "woman." If we start to say that such and such a woman is perhaps not entirely a woman or not a woman at all, that this "father" is not a father, we can no longer fight since we no longer know who is in front of us. It's so destructive, so destabilizing that those of us who are conscious of what is at stake are often pushed toward a form of interdict. Only when we are posthumous can we place the earth in question; make the earth tremble.

In the second passage from *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* reprinted here, Cixous stresses the importance of dreams as a source for writing.[1] Citing Kafka's insistence that "a book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us,"[2] Cixous suggests that dreams have the capacity to shatter the "eggshell" constructions we create about our lives.[3] The passage also exemplifies the rich textual layering characteristic of Cixous' critical style, as she refers to works by Kafka, Lispector, the brothers Grimm, Mandelstam, Dante, Hofmannsthal and Rimbaud.

The passage is taken from pp. 63–5 of "The School of Dreams," the second lecture in the Wellek series, in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. The text is edited by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers from an English transcript with French additions, and is substantially revised by Hélène Cixous.

Staring at length at the face of God

What we hope for at the School of Dreams is the strength both to deal and to receive the axe's blow, to look straight at the face of God, *which is none other than my own face*, but seen naked, the face of my soul. The face of "God" is the unveiling, the staggering vision of the construction we are, the tiny and great lies, the small non-truths we must have incessantly woven to be able to prepare our brothers' dinner and cook for our children. An unveiling that only happens by surprise, by accident, and with a brutality that shatters: under the blow of the truth, the eggshell we are breaks. Right in the middle of life's path: the apocalypse; we lose a life.

To my sincere surprise, which is only the product of a form of blindness, I realized in time that the writers I love above all are of the dying-

clairvoyants kind. What also reunites these authors is that they wrote, as I like to say, *by the light of the axe*: they all dared to write the worst, dared to "shatter the frozen sea," as Kafka puts it, break eggshells, the hulls of boats; they all dared to crack skulls, their own skulls, and return to the forest. All these things are discharged through violent separation, loss, and sudden good luck – without which we would indeed be limited; we are able to do this at the School of Dreams. Where is it situated?

The School of the Dead is behind the wall.

The School of Dreams is located under the bed

I have a faint recollection from an apparently naïve *Grimm's Tale* of a king whose daughters were ruining him. He kept them carefully locked in, as is proper, and didn't know why each day they needed to change their shoes. The daughters mysteriously wore out their shoes. Until the day the king planted a spy to throw light on this matter. At nightfall the daughters pulled the bed aside, lifted up the trap door, climbed down the ladder beneath the palace, and went out into the forest and danced all night. Perhaps my version is not completely accurate, but that is of no importance, since it's the perfect metaphor for the School of Dreams, bringing together all the elements, including jouissance. It's about doing what is forbidden: sexual pleasure. There is also the wearing out of the shoes, which gave me particular pleasure when I was little without my knowing why. Now I know much better why and I dedicate this tale to Mandelstam.

Mandelstam asks very seriously in his "Conversation about Dante": how many pairs of shoes Dante must have worn out in order to write *The Divine Comedy*, because, he tells us, that could only have been written on foot, walking without stopping, which is also how Mandelstam wrote.[4] Mandelstam's whole body was in action, taking part, searching. Walking, dancing, pleasure: these accompany the poetic act. I wonder what kind of poet doesn't wear our their shoes, writes with their head. The true poet is a traveler. Poetry is about traveling on foot and all its substitutes, all forms of transportation.

Mandelstam wore out hundreds of pairs of shoes. You cannot write such intense, dense poetry without the kind of dance that dances you round the world. Mandelstam himself could not write without walking round and round. When he was prevented from walking he died.

So perhaps dreaming and writing do have to do with traversing the forest, journeying through the world, using all the available means of transport, using your own body as a form of transport. *The Wanderer*, a

beautiful text by Hofmannsthal, tells the story of a journey through Greek and Turkish lands in which the narrator meets a strange traveler.[5] This man has apparently been walking for centuries, he is never named, but when you have lived in the country of poets, you immediately recognize who he is: he is Rimbaud. To meet Rimbaud we have to walk to Austria, to the Greece that is hidden within Austria; we have to travel to the heart of the country of the unconscious, where we may again find those countries we have lost, including Algeria and the Jardin d'Essais. But for this we have to walk, to use our whole body to enable the world to become flesh, exactly as this happens in our dreams. In dreams and writing our body is alive: we either use the whole of it or, depending on the dream, a part. We must embark on a body-to-body journey in order to discover the body.

(. . .)

In order to go to the School of Dreams, something must be displaced, starting with the bed. One has to get going. This is what writing is, starting off. It has to do with activity and passivity. This does not mean one will get there. Writing is not arriving; most of the time it's *not arriving*. One must go on foot, with the body. One has to go away, leave the self. How far must one not arrive in order to write, how far must one wander and wear out and have pleasure? One must walk as far as the night. One's own night. Walking through the self toward the dark.

In the third extract from *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* reprinted here, Cixous cites Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.* to argue that what is spurned by the Bible as "unclean" – *immonde*, literally "out of the world," "imund" – is the "root" of writing.[6] Cixous suggests writing derives precisely from this place which precedes prohibition, and so has the potential to return us to "paradise."

The passage is on pp. 118–19 of "The School of Roots," the final lecture in the Wellek series, in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. The text is edited by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers from an English transcript with French additions, and is substantially revised by Hélène Cixous.

Writing (. . .) does not come from outside. On the contrary, it comes from deep inside. It comes from what Genet calls the "nether realms," the inferior realms (*domaines inférieurs*).[7] We'll try to go there for a time, since this is where the treasure of writing lies, where it is formed, where

it has stayed since the beginning of creation: down below. The name of the place changes according to our writers. Some call it hell: it is of course a good, a desirable hell. This is what Clarice calls it: *inferno*. She does not always use the word hell but all kinds of parallel denominations ("*the other side*" cited in *The Stream of Life* is Tsvetaeva's abyss).[8] It is deep in my body, further down, behind thought. Thought comes in front of it and it closes like a door. This does not mean that it does not think, but it thinks differently from our thinking and speech. Somewhere in the depths of my heart, which is deeper than I think. Somewhere in my stomach, my womb, and if you have not got a womb – then it is somewhere "else." You must climb down in order to go in the direction of that place. But as I said yesterday, this sort of descent is much more difficult to achieve, much more tiring, much more physically exacting (*physically* because the soul is body), than climbing up. It is a climb, but it requires the whole strength of everything that is you – which I don't want to call "body," since it is more complex than the body – to go through the various doors, obstacles, walls, and distances we have forged to make a life. I know besides that what also prevents us in our society from going there is not our inability – because *all of us* are able – but our cowardice, our fear. Our fear, since we know perfectly well that we will reach the dangerous point where those who are excluded live – and we hate exclusion. This is our emotional, our personal, and political problem, the fact that we can't bear exclusion. We are afraid of it, we hate to be separated, that is why we are apt to commit all kinds of small crimes, self-denials, and treachery.

But one has to choose between losing what is mund and losing the best part of ourselves that is called imund. Since we are shaped by years and years of all kinds of experiences and education, we must travel through all sorts of places that are not necessarily pleasant to get there: our own marshes, our own mud. And yet it pays to do so. The trouble is we are not taught that it pays, that it is beneficial. We are not taught the pain nor that in pain is hidden joy. We don't know that we can fight against ourselves, against the accumulation of mental, emotional, and biographical clichés. The general trend in writing is a huge concatenation of clichés. It is a fight one must lead against subtle enemies. Our personal enemies in this fight are those Kafka denounced in preventing our return to paradise. Kafka insists paradise is not lost, it is there. But we are lazy and impatient. If we were neither lazy nor impatient we would be back in paradise. But we have to deal with this laziness and impatience. And of course with all the representatives of "Those Bible."[9]

NOTES

1 See also "The Double World of Writing," in Susan Sellers (ed.), *Delighting the Heart: A Notebook by Women Writers*, London: The Women's Press, 1989, p. 18. [Ed.]

2 See Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston, New York: Schocken Books, 1978, p. 16. [Ed.]

3 The reference is to a short story by Clarice Lispector entitled "Love," in which a woman, carrying a basket of eggs, has a sudden vision that momentarily changes her perception of her life ("Love," in *Family Ties*, translated by Giovanni Pontiero, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972). See *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, pp. 62–3. [Ed.]

4 See "Conversation about Dante," in *Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, translated by Jane Garry Harris and Constance Link, Ardis: Ann Arbor, 1979, p. 7. [Trans.]

5 See "The Wanderer," in *Hugo Von Hofmannsthal: Selected Prose*, translated by Mary Hottinger and Tania and James Stern, New York: Pantheon, 1963. [Trans.]

6 See *The Passion According to G.H.*, translated by Ronald W. Sousa, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pp. 64–5. See also *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 117: "that is my theme for today: to be 'imund,' to be unclean with joy. *Immonde*, that is, out of the *mundus* (the *world*). The monde, the world, that is so-called clean. The world that is on the good side of the law, that is 'proper,' the world of order. The moment you cross the line the law has drawn by wording, verb(aliz)ing, you are supposed to be out of the world. You no longer belong to the world." [Ed.]

7 See *The Thief's Journal*, translated by Bernard Frechtman, New York: Grove, 1964, p. 45. [Trans.]

8 See Clarice Lispector, *The Stream of Life*, translated by Elizabeth Lowe and Earl Fitz, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 13. [Trans.]

9 The reference is to Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.*, p. 64. See, for Cixous' detailed discussion, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, pp. 114–15. [Ed.]