

Feminine Writing Today: Interview with H  l  ne Cixous
By Gra  yna Walczak

H  l  ne Cixous is a renowned French feminist writer, philosopher, playwright, activist, and Professor. She was born in Algeria and studied in France. She started publishing in the late 1960's, when she wrote The Exile of James Joyce. In 1968, she also published her first autobiographical novel (Dedans), which won the Prix M  dicis. In the 1970's, she began to be involved in exploring the relationship between sexuality and writing, and in that time she published some of her most influential works: "Sortie," "The Laugh of the Medusa," and "Coming to Writing." One of the most innovative ideas in these writings is that our sexuality and the language in which we communicate are inextricably linked. Since then, she is considered one of the pillars of Poststructuralist Feminist Theory. Cixous is also frequently cited in connection with the deconstructionist theory. Her ideas on writing have an affinity with the philosophy of her lifelong friend Jacques Derrida. With them, she sought to blur boundaries of exclusion, inherent in Western thought. She published with Derrida Voiles (Veils) and later wrote a book on him: Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint (2001). Cixous is a very prolific writer and her work includes a wide array of topics and genres. She published over twenty volumes of poems, six books of essays, five plays and numerous articles. In addition to Derrida and Joyce, she has written monographs on the works of Clarice Lispector, Maurice Blanchot, Franz Kafka, Heinrich von Kleist, Michel de Montaigne, Ingeborg Bachmann, Thomas Bernhard, and Marina Tsvetaeva. Because of her wide

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variety of interests and versatility, it is difficult to place her in a particular scholarly category.

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GW: Your work has been very influential to literary criticism. Particularly for developing the concept of *écriture féminine*, but several decades have passed since you have defined it and there have been surely many changes in the ways in which women write. How do you define women's writing today, and what differences are there, if any, between the ways women and men write?

HC: I can't answer because this is an interesting question, but it is very global. Indeed, you're right, time has passed, but when I wrote things thirty years ago it was still low end. That is, women were still remaining outside the main field of literature and there were very few prominent writers. But there have been a lot of changes since. There are more women writers than men writers, which is at least a sign of improvement in society. So, the standpoint which is minor, the analysis, has to be displaced, moved. Since so many women are engaged now in writing, whereas, on the contrary, there were so few when I started writing. Then you have a large spectre of -- a large variety of -- keywriting attitudes and I wouldn't say anything that would gather or simplify. Its exactly as we could say: there are so many varieties of sleep and dreaming, and so many varieties of writing.

GW: According to your essays, the *écriture féminine* promotes difference. If I understand it right: a different writing for women. In your texts, you speak of writing from one's body, to flee reality, "to escape hierarchical bonds and

thereby come closer to *joissance*". Some may criticize this perspective as being *essentialist*, claiming that reducing women to an essence negates the very possibility of the change which you seek to promote. What would be your answer to these concerns?

HC: Yes, it is ridiculous. It's as if the concept of difference itself were essentialist. How can it be? It's the movement, it's the possibility of exchange, different poetics. So, it's just not essentialist, it is just the contrary. If identity is the result, there is no rigid monological identity. It's plural, always. It's always a bunch of differences. I are. Not I am.

GW: And how about the memory? Do you believe that there is a different way of remembering for men and women? I mean, remembering not in the sense of the neurological way, but in the sense of a discourse?

HC: First of all, I don't believe anything. I don't. No believing. But: feeling, receiving, changing, destabilizing. So, no believing. And even that idiomatic phrase "Do you believe?" or "I believe", which is American by the way, I never share.

GW: I understand.

HC: So, I don't believe, I unbelieve. This is a typical realm of experience, where you change even a species. I mean, I can be a crust of bread, a cat, and a rose, and a palm tree, etc., etc. You know, the moment you observe your own dreams, you do realize that the realm of the unconscious to which the memory relates, has, of course, no inside boundaries. It works on substitution.

GW: And recalling memories?

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HC: Memory is, as Freud would say, filogenetic; it's prehistorical. And when you remember, you're haunted, actually you are haunted by so many different beings or scenes. You yourself are the stage of memory, so why should it be masculine or feminine? It's peopled.

GW: As a writer yourself, does the consciousness of the deconstructive practice of the readers affect somehow your writing, for example? I mean, does the presence of the reader influence in any way the way you write?

HC: You don't write for the reader or to a reader. I don't think so. Writing doesn't write to a reader. Writing writes to writing. It doesn't address the person or a share of society, unless you write for a newspaper. Otherwise, writing addresses or interprets or concedes the depths of the selves. And reading is part of writing, in a way. Because writing reads itself, reads themselves. It hermetically interacts with its own art. It's very reflexive.

GW: I know that you have written many books that have been published in French, but they aren't published quickly into English. Is this because they are difficult to translate?

HC: It's very difficult. That's true. Actually a few books of mine have just come out and they are now available in the States. I wrote them eight years ago. That's the average time it takes for a book to be translated. But you're quiet right, books depend for their survival on translations, that is: on translators. Translators are themselves artists of a language and there are few, a very few. So it takes a long time to find your adequate, friendly, learned translators. A long time. Especially for

writing of my kind which is very political and philosophical. So, you have to wait, you have to be patient. But now I have a number of extraordinary translators to whom I owe enormously. [...]. There are four or five actually [...]. It's true that they have to be so generous, so inspired, that you can only hope that they will stay with you and that it will happen. It's a sacrificial and an extraordinary gesture - translation. So, a work depends on that. And it happens this way in all languages. I now I have a good crew of translators in Spanish and Catalan, etc.

GW: That leads to my next question. Because we read what is available here, in the United States, in English of course, but for others...

HC: There's another point. People throughout the world read in English. It's fortunate and it's very unfortunate. I'm read in all countries of the world in English. I have become a kind of English writer. And sometimes when I am in India or within Malay I tell them: look, I write in French. Because it's almost forgotten.

GW: I was wondering also on the fictional and non-fictional writing. Can we talk about a real fiction or a real non-fictional writing?

HC: My fiction is always thinking, it's a thinking type of prose or poetry. So it clouds, or it hides and manifests at the same time traces of philosophy or whatever. So, it's normally impure. Of course, it goes through, or over or under the borders, separations, etc, etc. Whereas as for theory, when I, knowing that I have to resort to that kind of discourse, it's dryer, it's more demonstrative. Of course it has causes because I am asked by a certain public to explain or to express, or to depict a number of themes, but they are all included in my fiction. It's a way of explaining,

of opening, of discarding things that are in my fictional writing. So it's one of the reasons why for me it's a minor genre; it's restrictive in a way and indeed it responds to a demand, whereas as I told you, the fiction doesn't. It's responsible, but it does not answer to a requirement. It stood there free and it goes beyond.

GW: In your writings you express your concerns with colonialism. Is there any particular region or is it the universal idea of colonialism that you privilege? What region of the world would be the one you write about?

HC: You know, I was born in a colony, I was born in Algeria, so I was brought up on that, I learned everything from that: on the results of a colonial situation. So, of course, it determines all my vision of the world. I know that people colonize others, but not only human beings: they colonize everything. They colonize animals and themselves. So, it's an essential, urgent problem that we have to first of all uncover – because it's always covered, shielded by all kinds of good feelings. It's a deadly sin.

GW: My last question will be: what are you currently working on. May I ask you this question?

HC: I can sum it up. It's always the same thing. It's life, death. Life yet death. Death yet life. That's it.

GW: Thank you very much for speaking with me.

Grażyna Walczak
University of Florida

* Grażyna Walczak is a PhD candidate at the University of Florida