

Subsequently in defusing the revolutionary impact of feminist criticism, this anthology reduces it to a safe and trendy textual practice. Despite its political engagement which calls into question the male bias of literary studies, feminist criticism, as it is conveyed in this anthology, takes as its approach a methodology grounded in patriarchal philosophy and aesthetics. It is this contradiction between feminist politics and patriarchal criticism which compromises the radicalism of "the new feminist criticism."

While this contradiction does not

necessarily invalidate *The New Feminist Criticism*, it does underline the limitations of a feminist criticism built upon a political and theoretical conservatism. In its exclusion of French feminists — Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray — and more radical American feminists, such as Jardine, Spivak and Johnson, and as a result of the contributors' indifference to, or contempt for, current critical theories, this anthology does not address, let alone resolve, the paradox of its feminist ideology. If this anthology had considered or represented other, more radical theories, it would have achieved

an awareness of the patriarchal practices which inform its feminist theories and readings. The inclusion of marginal and radical feminists would have challenged the anthology's exclusiveness to make it more representative of current feminist thought. However, in its silencing of these women, *The New Feminist Criticism* offers only a class and culturally specific account of feminism. Subsequently, despite its many accomplishments, this anthology fails to fulfill the promise implied in its title, to represent *The New Feminist Criticism*.

HELENE CIXOUS: WRITING THE FEMININE

Verena Andermatt Conley. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

Jennifer Waelti-Walters

Hélène Cixous is a phenomenon, a fact which makes both the writing of Verena Conley's book and the writing of my review a much more complex matter than either would have been had Cixous been a simple writer. For many readers both in France and elsewhere Cixous is French feminism, and it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that one does get the impression that she has produced half of the total pile of feminist texts single-handedly since 1967. She was one of the founders of the Centre for Research in Women's Studies at the University of Paris VIII and states, "we founded it with the idea that there would be no more professors, no more masters — something that never did materialize, because if one is not the master, the other is of course." Her classes (grouped to make a day-long seminar on Saturdays) have become part of the Paris theatre scene, and it is obvious why when we read Conley's description:

In the pretext of her classroom, she enacts the release of the name [vulva] from its phantasm in italics above [a quote from LA, p. 110] to its Roman splendour when, at the beginning of every seminar, she unbuckles her belt: a half-cuirass. Her strap frees the body and disintegrates the militant or civic order of the practical world; this is indeed a sensuous militancy that calls her audience to write both with and against the male, to write when the strap undoes the pressures needed to protect and chastize the uterus in the

male order. Such are the lives of a modern Cleopatra, a magnanimous neo-Natura who forces the woman in writing to unbuckle the clothing with which she has had to be preserved.

A writer-actor of this ilk generates various and strong reactions; so it is with Cixous, Conley and me.

Cixous and me:

It should be made clear before I comment on Verena Conley's book that I have great difficulty in reading Hélène Cixous. I came to her writing with great enthusiasm in 1977 and started reading at the beginning: I enjoyed *Dedans* (1969), read her thesis on Joyce, managed *Les Commencements* (1970), and gave up on *Neutre* (1972), vexed and frustrated. Like Michel Butor (another avid reader of Joyce) Cixous loves abstruse intertextuality; unlike Butor, she gives the reader no signposts at all concerning where to find the source of the cross-references. I was offended, decided that she had picked up Joyce's flashy characteristics with none of the awareness for solid underpinning, and set her aside. Since then I have returned to her from time to time, and still find her modishly unintelligible in criticism and wildly self-indulgent in fiction. Everything she does, Jeanne Hyvrard and Mary Daly do better. I hoped that Conley might make me see the error of my ways.

Cixous and Conley:

Verena Conley likes Cixous' books and seems to understand them. In her own work she leads the reader through Cixous' works, laying out the "textual strategies," the major concepts and Cixous' shifting relationships with a series of mentors — male theorists

whose writings create a foundation for Cixous' own: Hegel, Freud, Bataille, Rilke, Heidegger, Lacan, Deleuze, Derrida.

Cixous moves from social revolution through linguistic revolution to more meditative "magic" writing in a series of transforming and transformative texts that force apart the rules and habits of language and mix theory and praxis. (In this way her work is similar to that of Nicole Brossard in Québec.) She, herself, claims that she is "the secretary of the unconscious" and writes "all that which inscribes itself, produces itself, develops at night, and which is infinitely larger than I."

She has three main aims which produce a variety of intertwined themes: (1) the writing of sexual/ libidinal drives; (2) the revalorization of women; and (3) the affirmation of life. All require an escape from the "phallogocentric entrapment," that is from the main assumptions of the dominant, male-biased thought processes, symbolisms and discourse of traditional culture and society.

Cixous postulates a notion of bisexual writing, which reveals both the "masculine" and "feminine" impulses in the author and which opens her/him to some understanding of the "external other," i.e. the opposite sex, and pursues it throughout her own books in a continuing search for the language of love and desire.

The revalorization of women is part of the same quest. Women should write to escape cultural and personal repressions, to release our own bodies and express our experience. Cixous claims that hysterics (like Freud's Dora) are the forerunners of the "new women" because only they have opposed phallogocentric desire and thus are in contact with their own drives, their own sense of self and own reality. We must

insist on the presence of women through insistence on our bodies. This is the way to deal with phallogocentric authority (and this is the way Cixous reads and teaches how to read Mallarmé, Freud, Derrida). Conley characterizes Cixous' "feminine" texts as "self-surpassing, open-ended, flowing. Each of these texts generates from a juxtaposition to other writing," as opposed to her "more properly novelistic works of half-closed narrative structures of plot development and intertextual binding."

Masculine forms are restrictive, masculine symbolisms are death inducing. (Germaine Greer makes this same important statement in *Sex and Destiny*.) Cixous writes towards life; in her works she is struggling constantly against all metaphorical encoding of death, and indeed against all reasoning by binary opposition which brings the necessary destruction of the other (a theme of Jeanne Hyvrard's work also). Yet she tries not to separate women from men, and this is possible because all unrepressed, writing folk are "missexuals," i.e. have "masculine" and "feminine" impulses. All difficulties are created by the phallogocentric and phallogocentric individuals (male and female) against whom Cixous is in revolt.

In sum, Cixous sees all women as triple: daughter, mother and absent mother. Every text then becomes a search for the "mother tongue" which is the voice of the absent mother — desire being always desire for what is lacking. Each book marks therefore another stage in Cixous' quest "of how to live without being limited by the law, fear, unhappiness in a poetic, not an abstract, way." The preoccupation remains the same though the mode of exploration is transformed within and by each text.

Conley and me:

If I have understood Conley accurately and if her interpretation of Cixous is

valid, then I have a number of issues to raise with Cixous. The main line of development as I have summarised it above is splendid; the problems lie in the way in which this development happens. (1) Cixous complains that the phallogocentric think of women only as bodies — so does Cixous as far as I can tell. Her bodies are unrepressed, their bodies are repressed, but they are bodies all and women are restricted yet again to sexual activity. (2) We are told that "a woman writer must be legitimized by her father as stylus and the mother as *écriture*... Still others, like Cixous herself, have been legitimized by the absent (dead) father and by the mother." Conley maintains that in *Le Livre de Promethea* (1983), Promethea is free of the "authority of a father," but given the unending succession of male authority figures underlying all Cixous' writing, it seems to me that she is searching for an absent father and approval in her "paternal language" too. In the interview at the end of the book Cixous explains at some length the way she takes the best of the various male theoreticians' thought, avoids all pitfalls and subverts what we need for women's use. She presents her case well, but I still see Cixous (like Colette in another mode) as a woman whose point of reference — intellectual or sexual — is men. Despite the gynocentric trappings of her best outpourings, I still find Cixous to be very profoundly phallogocentric — the rest is rhetoric.

On the other hand, I may not have understood Conley accurately. Her book offers an infuriating mixture of very useful insights (her analyses of how Cixous writes are extremely enlightening), of pseudo-poetic rhetoric, and of totally unreadable sentences that have been transposed undigested from fashionably pretentious French. The result is virtually unreadable in places and frequently briefly and vertiginously unintelligible. I offer you an example which at least has the merit of being

amusing. Conley is discussing the journal *Poétique* and its treatment of *Finnegans Wake* and "missexualité":

The enumeration of academic copulatives is exemplary of a writing neck-tied by a tradition that the missexual gap — here a negatively matrilineal format Cixous offers at the beginning and ending of the number — will serve to bring out its platitude.

She assigns herself a prosthetic task in the contribution entitled "La Missexualité." Following the asymptotic contours of the inner breast and the Cleopatrician phantasmelaborated in La Jeune Née, Cixous writes a marginal text uplifting the collegiate sag in the middle of the issue by compressing the midriff bulge so characteristic of most masculine writing in Joyce studies. The missexual, drawn from a mid section, the middle of linear thinking, the median point between A and Z as the navel of the alphabet and the interior margin, will in her eyes espouse a freely militarized feminism, a locus in the middle-of-the-bed which has no real counterpart in American movements.

Conley has committed the cardinal sins of criticism: (1) she wants to write like her author; (2) she wants to impress her author. The result is that she, also, is self-indulgent in her writing — dragging her metaphors far beyond the limits of any known Procrustean bed (if I may join the game too), playing with language when she needs to analyse, turning a nice fancy when we, poor readers, need her to explain.

The way in which this book was written poses serious problems to the reader (how it got past an editor is beyond me), and that is a pity. Hélène Cixous is an important figure whom the anglophone world needs to understand and maybe even appreciate. Verena Conley produces moments of fascinatingly lucid exposition — would the whole book were thus.

THE AESTHETICS OF POWER: THE POETRY OF ADRIENNE RICH

Claire Keyes. Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1986.

Ian Sowton

One of the most useful moves in this book is to put Rich's prose writing, as

in "The Kingdom of the Fathers" (*Partisan Review*, 1975) and some of the essays collected in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, into ongoing intertextual conversation with her poetry. Those prose pieces were being written during the same period as the poems published in *Leaflets: Poems, 1965-1968* (1969), *The Will to Change: Poems, 1968-1970* (1971), *Diving Into the Wreck: Poems,*

1971-1972 (1973), and *Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974-1977* (1978). The inclusion of dates in Rich's series of titles is significant. The sense becomes very strong of the obligation to write oneself out of silence, or away from the accents of The Masters' Voice, and into one's own herstory. So does the sense of an alert, ongoing conversation with one's own times. So does the sense of pilgrimage. Rich's collection of