

## The Newly Born Woman

by Hélène Cixous and  
Catherine Clément  
Minneapolis: The University of  
Minnesota, 1986  
(Originally published in France  
as *La jeune née*  
Paris: UGE, 1975)

*The Newly Born Woman* is a blending of many voices: hysterical voices, mythological voices and fictional voices from the work of Aeschylus to that of Kleist. Like the figure of the hysteric with whom both authors are concerned, the text "unties familiar bonds...gives rise to magic in ostensible reason," frustrates and fascinates simultaneously. The book is organized into three sections. Part 1 contains Clément's two essays, "The Guilty One" (on the relationship between the sorceress and the hysteric) and "Seduction and Guilt" (on the transformation of hysterical suffering into guilt). Part 2 is Cixous's essay "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays," portions of which appear in the collection *New French Feminisms*,<sup>1</sup> and Part 3 is the "trans-scription" of a dialogue between two women which often shares the page with quotations from Marx, Engels, Gramsci and Freud.

Although Clément and Cixous share an interest in what has come to be known as *l'écriture féminine* (a writing which explores/creates/derives from the feminine Imaginary), they differ significantly on the issue of its potential effects on social and political life. For Clément, the power of the imagination, poetry, and desire may free individuals "to act on the real" or it may "motivate"<sup>2</sup>, but such power is not subversive in and of itself. In her view, real change does not occur at the individual level but at the level of class struggle. On the other hand, Cixous finds class struggle attenuated; she distrusts the idealism of those who would subsume the women's struggle under that of class and who would sacrifice poetry to the political. If forced to choose between politics and poetry (a false dilemma?) Cixous would sacrifice politics to poetry (and this seems to be one of the criticisms most often made of her work<sup>3</sup>). Despite these apparently irreconcilable political differences which emerge explicitly from the dialogue, Cixous and Clément agreed to co-author the book, as if hoping something new would be born of their collective effort. Perhaps it is the attempt to think poetry and politics together, and to read Clément and Cixous together without having to choose between them that constitutes the challenge of this book?

Clément and Cixous both address the relationship between hysteria and femininity, although their approaches and perspectives differ radically. Clément will make this relationship the central theme of her contribution, while Cixous allows it to wander in and out of her text.

For Clément the hysteric, like the sorceress, is an historical figure who no longer exists. Although she may haunt, she does not inhabit modern woman. Following a remark made by Freud after reading *Malleus Maleficarum* ("The Witches' Hammer, A Manual For Inquisitors") Clément traces the affinities between witch and hysteric who she claims are related as mother to daughter. Both represent what has been excluded from the socio-symbolic order; they are "possessed" and forced by the inquisitor/analyst to confess their sins. Born of the sorceress and sharing her erotic tendencies, the hysteric suffers an internalized, psychic pain as opposed to the physical pain inflicted by the torturer. Although the suppressed and transgressive eroticism is enacted in the witches' sabbath or the hysterical attack, such theatrics are considered by Clément recuperable by a social order which much contain excess or madness.

Clément follows the historical assignation of guilt from sorceress to hysteric to fathers, mothers, daughters and finally, to the family itself. But here it is difficult to sort out fantasy from reality as Clément's narrative becomes entangled in the same "vertiginous regression" psychoanalysis discovers in its search for the truth. Insofar as the hysteric refuses to circulate but puts into circulation her own incestuous desire, she is guilty of transgressing the fundamental laws of human society. On the other hand, she is also the victim of seduction by fathers, uncles and brothers whose perversion is rendered invisible, impossible, a mere fantasy by virtue of having designated the hysteric "the family invalid". Finally, the hysteric is trapped within a familial structure in which her own desire cannot exist, and she becomes a metaphor for femininity struggling to give birth to itself.

Clément will insist that hysterics are now deceased and that they were impotent except insofar as they anticipated the emergence of new woman. The hysteric is a figure who is "ambiguous, anti-establishment and conservative," an imaginary inscription on the body of the family which knows how to contain disturbances:

(Hysteria) introduces dissension, but it doesn't explode anything at all; it doesn't disperse the bourgeois family, which also exists only through dissension, which holds together only in the possibility or reality of its own disturbance, always reclosable, always reclosed.

According to Clément, to study hysteria is one thing, but to believe it produced any lasting effects outside the "Imaginary" realm is to participate in "the Armchair Real: the limits of psychoanalysis." Perhaps this is also the limit of Clément's analysis?



If Clément is preoccupied with enclosures, imprisonment and impossibilities, Cixous is looking for exits, ways out and possibilities. Stylistically influenced by Derrida, Deleuze, Nietzsche and Joyce, Cixous finds in writing a means of escape to another space as well as an escape from the claustrophobic, silent places traditionally occupied by women. Falling somewhere "between theory and fiction", Cixous's writing is difficult to describe; it fluctuates, changes subjects, adopts various persona, articulates a potential way of being/thinking which is foreign to us. Or perhaps not so foreign?

Cixous seems to find within her own feminine imaginary the voice of the hysteric. One might say that this voice speaks through her, that it is witness to the otherness within the self. Cixous's infinite capacity to identify with authors and literary characters both ancient and modern, both male and female, indicates the presence in her writing of what she call "the other bisexuality." Distinct from the notion of bisexuality as a fantasy of wholeness based on a denial of sexual difference, Cixous's other bisexuality refers to "the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes. . . the nonexclusion of difference." Although Cixous attributes this bisexuality to women (due to libidinal economy not based on loss, due to mother's experience of non-self within self, and due to the necessity for the dominated to recognize the dominant), it also functions as a potential or an ideal for both sexes.

Cixous's imaginative construction of the feminine as bisexual derives in part from her reading of hysteria and in part from her identification with Freud's hysterical patient, Dora.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Clément's hysteric who is a woman of the past, imprisoned in the family, Cixous's hysteric is a sister, a living presence, whose "voiceless rebellions" are now being heard:

"Dora seemed to me to be the one who resists the system, the one who cannot stand that the family and society are founded on the body of women, on bodies despised and rejected, bodies that are humiliated once they have been used. And this girl -- like all hysterics, deprived of the possibility of saying directly what she perceived . . . still had the strength to make it known. It is the nuclear example of women's power to protest. It happened in 1899; it happens today wherever women have not been able to speak differently from Dora, but have spoken so effectively that it bursts the family into pieces."

Cixous is able to affirm the disruptive potential of the hysteric, to make it productive, to recognize in the hysteric's struggle the "insoluble contradiction" of being a woman when woman means nothing, to say "I am what Dora would have been if woman's history had begun." (p.85) Clément refuses the uncomfortable alliance Cixous makes with Dora, preferring to keep this ineffectual symbol of victimization firmly in the past: "Listen, you love Dora, but to me she never seemed a revolutionary character." The disagreement which erupts at the end of the book is provocative and points to questions that have been lingering throughout the text. At what point does individual rebellion become politically significant? For whom? To what extent do we exaggerate minor points of resistance to assuage our fears of ineffectuality or or ultimately cooptability? Is Cixous's powerful rhetoric and imaginative writing promising or misleading?

From Freud's essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" we learn that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way . . . The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real.<sup>5</sup>

We should resist the temptation to use this analogy between the child and the creative writer to discredit Cixous (as I had originally intended to do), to claim, as her critics do, that her playful and poetic prose bears no relation to reality but remains hopelessly utopian. For Cixous's playful exploration of the feminine Imaginary and her emphasis on flight can indeed be interpreted as a flight from the dominant social reality, a reality founded on a master/slave model and on the repression/exclusion of otherness. Although the limitations inherent in any utopian project are applicable to Cixous (Toril Moi provides an exhaustive list<sup>6</sup>), this is far from rendering invalid Cixous's attempt to theorize other possibilities based on her own desire and experience.

In the realm of fantasy one takes one's own desire to be reality, and in the realm of reality there seems little room for fantasy. If the poet, the writer and the child occupy a different space it is because they are able to move between imagination and reality, to distinguish between the two. Perhaps the newly born woman, unlike the hysteric, will be able to live there too.

#### Notes

1 Cixous, "Sorties," and "The Laugh of the Medusa" in E. Marks and I. de Courtivron. *New French Feminisms* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

2 Clément, "Enslaved Enclave," in *New French Feminisms* . p. 131.

3 Cixous's work has come under attack by both French and English speaking women for being apolitical, ahistorical, essentialist, idealist and bourgeois. See "Variations on Common Themes," in *New French Feminisms*, Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture Feminine", *Feminist Studies* 7(2), 1981, and Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*. (New York: Methuen, 1985).

4 Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" Standard Edition, Vol.8. Also see Cixous, *Portrait de Dora* (Paris: Ed. des femmes, 1976).

5 Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," Penguin Edition, Vol. 14, p.132.

6 Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Ch. 6.

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## The Nuclear Controversy

William P. Bundy ed.  
New York: New American Library,  
1985.

## Nuclear War: The Search for Solutions

Published by Physicians for Social Responsibility  
Altona, Manitoba: Freisen  
Printers, 1985.

## The Strategic Defense Initiative: Assured Security for Canada,

William B. Campbell and  
Richard K. Melchin  
Vancouver: Carachain  
Conservation Centre,  
Kirk Mailing services Ltd.,  
1985.

## Star Wars: Self-Destruct Incorporated

E.P. Thompson and Ben  
Thompson  
London: Maryland Press,  
1985.

The scrutiny of a major third player, the peace movement, has profoundly affected the way the public discussion of nuclear weapons has been conducted in the 1980s. The nuclear debate is no longer the exclusive preserve of policy makers, military strategists and the arms industry. On the contrary, the past few years have witnessed a remarkable growth of literature on the subject. Hundreds of books and countless articles have reflected the concerns and growing sophistication of a population deeply disturbed by the nuclear threat. This literature is the product of a broad movement and increasingly a resource for the movement as it deepens its understanding of the issues and seeks political strategies which will effectively impose genuine anti-nuclear policies on the governments of the world.

*The Nuclear Controversy* is a collection of articles first published in the journal *Foreign Affairs* between 1981 and 1985. Edited by William P. Bundy, former assistant Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy Administration and Assistant Secretary of State under President Johnson, the book is published for those who feel a "sense of frustration, even helplessness" with the breakdown of international peace negotiations and the poor quality of debate in the (Republican dominated) political arena. Though by no means a work stemming from the anti-nuclear peace movement it represents an attempt by a group of former senior government officials and experts to outline alternatives to the policies of the Reagan administration. As Bundy explains in his introduction: "... this is an action book . . . every article in this series offers not only important analysis