READING DIALOGUES:
EXPLORING INTERACTIONS BETWEEN TEXT AND IDENTITY
IN THE FICTION OF CHRISTIANE BAROCHE, HELENE CIXOUS
AND PAULE CONSTANT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploratory study of the transformative potential of reading, taking as its specific focus the interaction between fictional texts and the identity of the reader. Based on close readings of post-1980 fiction by the three writers, Christiane Baroche, Hélène Cixous and Paule Constant, the textual analyses are situated largely within a framework of feminist theory, although they are not restricted to gender issues.

The first chapter sets out my conceptual framework, positing a dialogic model of reading and formulating a dynamic, mobile concept of identity. The remaining chapters are speculative explorations of interactions between text and reader, each chapter considering examples from each of the three writers. My approach is thematic, the topics being both suggested by the texts themselves and implicated in different ways with (sexual) identity: identification (Chapter 2), loss (Chapter 3), mother-daughter relations (Chapter 4) and difference (Chapter 5). The textual analyses are underpinned by a politics of reading which is explicitly foregrounded in Chapter 2.

My analyses draw out a series of reading effects – meditation, interrogation, speculation – and suggest that it is when these effects last beyond the reading of the text that reading is likely to be most transformative. Moreover, the most productive interactions between text and identity, whether they are psychological or political, are shown also to involve interactions between individual and collective identities.

My thesis presents analyses of fiction texts which are not yet widely studied in anglophone countries, implements a sustained exploration of the effects of reading, and provides a conceptual framework for further investigations. I hope that in this way it will contribute to, and advance, knowledge in not only French studies but also both feminist literary studies and a growing body of scholarly work on reading.
In memory of my mother, Marjorie,

(1920-1990)

who taught me to read and to love books
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INTRODUCTION

The very existence of feminist literary theory attests to the political dimension of literature. However, the ways in which literary texts might contribute to socio-political change are neither straightforward nor easily identifiable. In this connection, Hélène Cixous's theoretical and fictional work has consistently attracted (feminist) interest and generated discussion. Championing writing as both a personal and a political act of creation – in her 1970s essays, 'Sorties' and 'Le Rire de la Méduse' – she points to the interdependence between literature and perceptions of women's identity and to connections between identity, personal and social relations and social change.¹ Her argument is that literary texts not only reflect and reinforce cultural perceptions of (women's) identity but also contribute to this identity. Moreover, different ways of perceiving oneself and others, and alternative forms of relational arrangements, can result from and indeed foster social change.

Responses have been varied and thought-provoking – ranging from analyses of the conjunction of the poetical and the political in her work to the critical evaluation of her theories and practices in respect of gender and difference in texts. One of the topics which both Cixous herself and her critics address is reading. In ‘Learning to Read the Feminine’, for example, Susan Sellers engages with Cixous’s work in order to raise a series of questions about the part of gender, subjectivity and reader-positioning in the reading and interpretation of texts.² In turn, it is precisely these issues which provide the impetus to and the focus of my own enquiry, which is the exploration of possibilities of interaction within the process of reading between fictional texts and the identity of the reader.
Engaging with unresolved questions of whether – and how – fictional writing can bring about change, my thesis embraces both the personal and the political. My project is primarily a feminist one, concerned principally with exploring ways of understanding some of the processes of change surrounding new, different formulations of women’s identities, but it does not limit itself to collective concerns nor is it restricted to gender issues. My methodology, which is to address the problematic specifically, although not exclusively, from the perspective of women, has a three-fold purpose: first, to contribute to scholarly (feminist) work on the role of literary texts in relation to women’s identity; second, to propose a framework for similar studies on a broader range of identity formulations; third, to take into account individuality and singularity. Ultimately, it is this last point which has been the defining factor of both the structure and the methodology of my thesis. Indeed, rather than simply taking account of the subjectivity of the reader, my project rests on it. My undertaking is, however, to consider the implications of that subjectivity and to attempt to make explicit what might happen implicitly in reading rather than to analyse the interpretations of individual readers. I have therefore chosen not to base my analyses on readings by ‘real readers’, although I make reference to several existing studies of this kind. The readings of the texts are therefore my own, but this does not render my study autobiographical; my readings are those of a speculative critic rather than a ‘lay’ reader. To this end, I use academically acceptable interpretive strategies, and wherever possible make connections with existing bodies of work.

All the fiction texts I have chosen to read were published after 1980 and were selected for two principal reasons. On the one hand, by choosing to base my analyses on post-1980 writing by women in France, my project is partly concerned with
stimulating the interest of Anglophone scholars, students and readers in some of the exciting and diverse fiction that is being written by women in contemporary France – fiction that is not necessarily either explicitly or implicitly feminist but which is both written and read at a cultural moment when feminism is implicitly included in varying degrees in what we do, say and write. On the other hand, the texts of all three writers chosen, Christiane Baroche, Hélène Cixous and Paule Constant, offer a variety of productive intersections with the topic of women’s identity. Cixous’s work, spanning thirty years and including fiction, essays and writing for the theatre, is perhaps an obvious choice, not only because her ideas provided the springboard for my whole project but also because her complex fictions are not widely read in Anglophone countries. Although neither Baroche nor Constant is well-known outside France, their work warrants academic interest: Baroche is also a prolific short story writer but her novels are particularly interesting for the wealth of imaginative although realistic, identities and relationships they bring into being for men as well as for women; Constant’s prize-winning fiction is accessible yet thought-provoking.

My project is thus set broadly within a feminist framework. For primary theoretical texts, I rely predominantly on the theorists working in France whose work has most substantially contributed to feminist theory, namely Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva; British and U.S. critical evaluations of their thinking are also taken into account. The different intersections of the work of these theorists with psychoanalytical theory suggest ways of understanding the connections between texts and change as well as of conceptualising identity. Psychoanalysis therefore opens up and informs my own study, without however enclosing it.
‘(Women’s) Writing and (Women’s) Identity’ (Chapter 1) outlines my theoretical terms of reference, beginning with an examination of Cixous’s claims for the liberatory potential of writing for women. Responses to Cixous’s concept of *écriture féminine* suggest that the ongoing importance of her theoretical work of the 1970s rests with creative, speculative engagements with its implications rather than with the validity of a categorisation such as ‘écriture féminine’ or ‘women’s writing’. My own engagement is with the contribution that reading makes to the transformative process that writing is held to be. Making reference to modern theories of reading and intertextuality, I go on to posit reading as a dialogue – between text and reader.

In the context of this study, my understanding of identity is produced by reading Kristeva’s theory of the subject, *le sujet en procès*, together with Cixous’s concept of bisexuality. Informing each other, they allow a fluid and mobile formulation of identity, seen in terms of an ongoing process of dynamism and tension between the individual and a series of collective identities. For this reason, I generally choose to use the ambiguous ‘sexual identity’ rather than the more specific ‘gender identity’ in reference to women (and men). This terminology is intended to reflect the position that being a woman (and being a man) is much more than a question of either biological or culturally-constructed gender; that gender is always already affected by a number of social, cultural, political, and psychological factors; and that gender identity is always already intersected in varying degrees by other aspects of identity (for example, race, class, age, sexuality). The term ‘sexual identity’ thus allows for a play between gender, sexuality and psycho-sexual identity, without reducing sexual identity to any one of these axes – although one may be more to the fore at a particular moment. Moreover, I frequently make use of the form of expression ‘(sexual) identity’. By bracketing ‘sexual’ in this way, I refer at once both to
sexual identity and also to more general formulations of identity – whether that be in political terms or in relation to a personal sense of self. Such ambiguity has an unconfining purpose and my use of it is intentional when I do not wish to restrict my terms of reference to one specific aspect of identity; nonetheless, wherever I do refer to any particular form of identity – personal or political, individual or collective – I use the appropriate specific term.

Luce Irigaray’s work is both provocative and enabling. Chapter 1 ends with a discussion of the implications of her usage of ‘the imaginary’ for my project. The interdependence of the imaginary and the symbolic that Irigaray posits allows the conceptual conditions of possibility for connections between culture and identity, between literary texts and women’s identity.

The theoretical terms of reference set out in Chapter 1 thus put in place the conceptual framework for my enquiry. The remaining chapters take the form of speculative explorations of ways in which reading fiction might interact, psychologically or politically, with the identity of the reader, each chapter considering examples from each of my three chosen writers. The topics of these chapters, subjectivity and identification (Chapter 2), loss (Chapter 3), mother-daughter relations (Chapter 4) and difference (Chapter 5), have all been selected for their different associations with (sexual) identity as well as being suggested by the fiction texts themselves.

It may be axiomatic that reading can (sometimes) change one’s life, but it is not so clear what the conditions for this transformation are. Identifications made in reading may perhaps seem to produce the possibility of straightforward interaction between a text and the identity of its reader, but the question of whether these interactions necessarily lead to any sort of permanent transformation is less easily answerable. Reading
identifications are in fact a complex and unpredictable matter, because the subjective perspective of each individual reader comes into play. Nonetheless, it is also clear that there are a number of ways in which texts construct certain reading positions or initiate particular readings. ‘Text/Reader Relations: Inclusion/Exclusion, Seductions and the Politics of Reading’ (Chapter 2) explores both these problematics by considering examples of metafiction. The self-conscious textuality of these texts readily lends itself to an investigation of the politics of reading. In the first part of the chapter, examples of textual readers reading within texts offer a range of reading identifications for discussion; these same examples are then read closely in order to ascertain how far their own readers may be positioned by them. The second part continues the discussion in relation to fiction about writing. Chapter 2 suggests that it is not so much reading identification in itself which provides the conditions of possibility of change (although it may provide the necessary reader engagement); rather, it is a question of whether the effects of the reading (identification) stay with the reader beyond the reading of the text. The dialogue between text and reader therefore becomes particularly meaningful and potentially transformative in fiction where, as readers, we are led out of the text, thus provoking questions about our own lives or about the systems within which we live.

Loss is a thematic feature common to the fiction of Baroche, Cixous and Constant, and indeed loss is a part of the human condition. In different ways, loss is closely linked to identity – whether it be primary loss, loss of a loved one by death or abandonment, or loss of youth, beauty or a sense of self. ‘Reading (about) Loss: Remembering Losing in order to Create (One’s Self)’ (Chapter 3) explores some possible reader interactions with loss in fiction texts. Informed by Kleinian psychoanalytical theories on mourning, it suggests that in reading (about) loss, in becoming party to the
pain of loss in reading, readers may make connections with either personal or collective loss in their own lives. Recovering the pain of loss in this way could, it is proposed, be part of the processes of mourning, of which remembering and reparation are a creative part. In Kleinian terms, mourning re-works the trauma of primary loss and has a beneficial, regenerative effect on the individual psyche. In this case, whether reading (about) loss has a cathartic effect or produces a meditative response, it might be able to contribute to those creative psychical processes which are so closely tied up with our selves. Chapter 3 is gender-specific only in the particular associations it makes between reading and psychological studies on women's disconnections from their girlhood selves. In this respect, reading might, I suggest, initiate a certain psychologically beneficial reconnection with that loss.

The chapter which follows is, on the other hand, exclusively concerned with women's identities – both social and psychical. ‘Subjects in Love? Women-to-Women Relationships’ (Chapter 4) is founded on the premiss that women's identities are deeply implicated in mother-daughter relations – and this topic is considered from the perspectives of women as mothers as well as daughters. Informed by feminist theoretical work on motherhood, this chapter engages both with Irigaray’s proposals that new, imaginary inscriptions of mother-daughter relations are necessary for feminist change and with Kristeva’s diagnosis that contemporary women require new discourses of motherhood. Literature, as one area of cultural production, promises to be the locus of emerging discourses, and chapter 4 therefore surveys the work of my chosen writers for their portrayals of mothering relations between women.

The diffusion of mothering relations identified in these texts may well be indicative of new discourses of motherhood but I also suggest a somewhat different
interpretation. The play between literal and figurative, symbolic, metaphorical and real mothering relations calls into question what the terms (and roles) 'mothering' and 'motherhood' mean – or could potentially mean. Readers are thus encouraged to speculate about the implications of such a questioning, and it is in this way that reading in itself becomes a creative, productive, interactive engagement with the problematic issues that surround motherhood as well as with the whole complex question of women's identity (trans)formation.

'Difference' is an ambiguous term and it is a wide topic but it has an ongoing place in feminist discussions of women's identity. Drawing on the work of a range of theorists, 'Sexual/Textual Difference: Exploring Sexual and Textual Relations' (Chapter 5) considers difference in terms of sexual difference, diversity, differentiation, marginality and change. Literature is held to make a difference socially, politically and psychically, and it is particularly valued for the part it can play in stimulating innovative thought and creating different ways of thinking.

Engaging with some of these aspects of difference, the fictional examples in this chapter also relate specifically to self-other relations. Identity is bound up in various ways in relations with different others and I suggest that reading has important interventions to make in this connection. Issues as diverse as post-colonial reading, patriarchal sexual politics and relationships of love show how individual readings and individual identities intersect and interact in different ways with collective concerns and group identities. Moreover, self-other relations, whether they be personal or social, impact on social organisation. The process of change lies in the passage between fiction and reality, between text and life; this passage is to be found in the creative, interrogative speculation of reading.
The originality of my project lies particularly in my choice of authors and of the fictional texts on which I base my analysis. To date, there has been no sustained academic or critical analysis in Britain of either Baroche's or Constant's novels and very little in other Anglophone countries. Cixous's fictions are not as well known as her theoretical texts in either Britain or America; some studies have been published on various of the post-1980 fictions which are the subject of my discussion but my perspectives are somewhat different. My close readings of fiction texts by these three contemporary women writers therefore, I hope, make a contribution to French literary studies in terms of the critical analyses I have carried out as well as helping to introduce these authors and texts to a wider audience.

My thesis contributes to an established body of feminist work on the relations between literature and women's identity; by means of its specific focus on reading, it advances the study of those issues. Moreover, it adds to a growing body of scholarly work on reading and its interaction with identities of all kinds. By considering the implications of subjective reading and speculating about ways in which literature might have a transformative effect on identity, I am therefore also proposing a conceptual framework which I suggest could accommodate further work of this kind on a different range of identities. In this way, I hope that my topic of enquiry, my methodology and my findings will contribute to the development of scholarly work by means of which we think about – and explain to ourselves – how literature changes our lives.


Modern feminist literary theory proclaims that literature itself is political. Indeed in different ways, the silencing of women in Western culture was already identified by precursors of contemporary feminism such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. On the one hand, few women writers have been granted the validating membership of the literary canon which enables their writing to be considered as 'literature', even though it is clear from the archaeological operations of specialist (women's) presses that women have always written. Any literary canon is determined in relation to the values of the current hegemony, from which women and women's writing have in the past been excluded. On the other hand, although women have always been represented in literary texts, feminist critics argue that the way they have been represented has contributed to their silencing. Consciousness-raising readings of canonical texts reveal ways in which women have been represented through the gaze of men. Historically, women in literature have been enclosed in stereotypical representations of femininity which conform to inscriptions of men's desires and fears, and thus women's own perspectives have been silenced.

Hélène Cixous's work has an influential – if controversial – place in modern feminist literary theory. Taking as her point of departure the silencing of women, Cixous proposes in her polemical and poetical essays of the 1970s, 'Sorties' and 'Le Rire de la Méduse', that women must write in order to counter this cultural – and political – exclusion. In 'Sorties', Cixous identifies the interdependence of this silencing of women in culture with the binary structure of Western thought, in which one term is always
defined in relation to its oppositional other. Moreover, the binary structure is hierarchical and in this scheme ‘woman’ is both ‘the other’ – and inferior – to ‘man’. Cixous considers that this leaves women not only socially oppressed but also alienated from themselves, forced to commit what Judith Fetterley terms ‘a kind of psychic suicide’. According to Cixous, women’s very existence and identity can only be determined in phallogocentric terms since no other possibilities exist: ‘ce qui en reste est impensable, impensé’ (‘Sorties’, p.118). Women’s own perspectives and desires remain not only unexpressed, repressed and invisible but not yet thought – and even unthinkable.

In ‘Sorties’, Cixous proposes that a ‘way-out’ of this situation for women can be found in and through writing – specifically in a writing which she terms *écriture féminine*. Although the personal fulfilment of artistic creation is an important factor of this ‘feminine’ liberation, Cixous’s argument has wider political (feminist) implications for women’s identity, since it would suggest that writing can in some way transform women’s identity in both individual and collective terms. However, it has become clear that while literature does impact in different ways on (women’s) identity, no simple or straightforward connection can be made between the two terms. New, positive, textual role models do not necessarily lead to different perceptions of identity for women nor to different formulations of lived reality.

Addressing precisely this problematic of the relationship between literature and identity and, in particular, the relationship between women’s writing and women’s identity, this chapter sets out the framework within which my enquiry into the transformative potential of literature is placed. Cixous’s work has provided my own point of departure, and thus the chapter begins with an exposition and an examination of the possibilities suggested by *écriture féminine* which is considered in the light of the major
critical responses to it. From Cixous’s work on writing, I turn next to the matter of reading. The role that reading plays in the relationship between text and identity is central to my argument; thus the second section of this chapter takes the form of a discussion of the theories of reading and intertextuality which propose the dialogic model of reading on which I base my analyses in subsequent chapters. In contemporary literary and cultural studies, the whole concept of identity is one ridden with controversy and confusion and I explicitly engage with this debate in the following section of this chapter by formulating a dynamic concept of identity based on a reading of Kristeva and Cixous, in which Kristeva’s theory of the subject, _le sujet en procès_, and Cixous’s concept of bisexuality mutually inform each other. Finally, completing the conceptual framework for my study, this chapter ends on a discussion of the work of Luce Irigaray as it relates to, and productively informs, my central problematic of the relationship between literary texts and women’s identity.

**ECRITURE FEMININE**

For Cixous, writing is the way _par excellence_ for women to express themselves and to counter the cultural silencing of women that she identifies. However, she makes it clear in her essays, ‘Le Rire de la Méduse’ and ‘Sorties’, that what she has in mind is not just any kind of writing but the invention of ‘une écriture neuve, insurgée’, which she names _écriture féminine_ (‘Sorties’, p.179). In these essays, _écriture féminine_ is held to be a new, different kind of writing, which incorporates both the sense of writing differently (from a tradition) and the sense of expressing difference (in this case, women’s specificities – whatever they may be). Moreover, Cixous proposes that through such writing women will be able to discover new (non-phallogocentric) ways of being women;
through writing, women will thus be ‘newly born’ – they will come into being as women differently from the way they have traditionally been conceived in phallogocentric culture.

However, Cixous’s term, *écriture féminine*, is ambiguous and has been (mis)interpreted in various ways, particularly in Britain and the United States where it has been variously translated as ‘women’s writing’, ‘feminine writing’ or a ‘feminine practice of writing’. Irrespective of Cixous’s particular use of ‘féminin’, which is discussed below, the sense of the French term, ‘féminin’, with its connotations of both ‘female’ and ‘feminine’, is ambiguous and difficult to convey in English, especially given feminist investment in the biological/cultural sex/gender opposition. An account of gender as a cultural construction is useful for feminism since it allows for the possibility of change. In these terms, ‘female’ generally connotes biological aspects of ‘being a woman’ while ‘feminine’ connotes culturally assigned qualities. However, traditional feminine attributes have been idealised and reified into the ‘Eternal Feminine’. Individual women thus have to find their own identities within or against this cultural framework. This is one of the reasons for the principal objections to Cixous’s celebratory use of ‘feminine’.

Interestingly, in *Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère*, Luce Irigaray makes a somewhat different distinction between the terms, ‘féminin’ and ‘féminité’, in French: ‘Je distingue. Je différencie féminité et féminin. Parce que féminité, c’est un mode de représentation de nous-mêmes pour le désir de l’homme. Souvent cela a été un dédale de séduction qui n’était pas une séduction pour nous, mais pour lui et pour eux’. Irigaray thus uses ‘féminin’ to relate to women’s own specificity as women while she describes the representation of women according to the desires of men as ‘féminité’. In the context of
this study, I generally translate Cixous’s ‘féminin’ as ‘feminine’ but I enclose it in quotation marks to convey her displacement of meaning.

In ‘Sorties’, Cixous resists any notion of definition for *écriture féminine*: ‘on ne pourra jamais *théoriser* cette pratique, l’enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu’elle n’existe pas’ (p. 169). For Cixous, definitions are not only enclosing but also limiting, and *écriture féminine* should thus always remain beyond – and exceed – definition. *Ecriture féminine* is in itself part of the challenge to the binary system of oppositional logic on which Western thought is based and, as such, contributes to the attempt to find different more fluid ways of thinking and writing. To define *écriture féminine* would therefore be to imprison it within boundaries which Cixous refuses to accept. Moreover, in order to work against traditional discourse in the ways she envisages, *écriture féminine* must of necessity resist definition: there must always be an excess of meaning; ambiguity and fluidity are part of its character and its strategy. Something of the concept must always remain undefined and, indeed, undefinable, otherwise it would be containable within traditional discourse.

Cixous’s refusal to define the concept of *écriture féminine* may be frustrating but, although the point is that it remains indeterminate, some clarification of the fluidity of her use of the terms *féminin* and *masculin* is both possible and necessary. Crucially, Cixous’s ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ do not necessarily coincide with biological sex, and she stresses that *écriture féminine* is not necessarily writing about women nor even writing by women. In this connection, Cixous cites examples of male writers in whose work she identifies traces of the ‘feminine’, such as Joyce, Genet, Kleist and Shakespeare; here, the ‘feminine’ would seem to relate to the expression of passion, otherness or difference which can only be expressed poetically. In ‘Sorties’, she nonetheless values the practice
of écriture féminine for women to write 'depuis et vers la femme', in order to express themselves as women and, importantly, as the women they might potentially become ('Sorties', p.171).

Like the rhythms, intonations and inflections of language that Julia Kristeva has theorised as 'the semiotic', Cixous's 'feminine' is linked to the unconscious, to bodily drives and rhythms, to the pre-oedipal and to the pre-linguistic. However, in Cixous's work, the term, 'féminin', is not only connected with the unconscious of the individual but also with culture; 'feminine' therefore connotes what is repressed and suppressed by and within an individual (male or female) and also by and within a culture – Cixous's 'feminine' is otherness, difference. In feminist terms, however, 'feminine' is a concept at the heart of women's oppression, weighed down as it is with connotations of what women are perceived to be and ought to be. Cixous's strategy of giving it new meaning is thus both provocative and political.

The choice of the nomenclature 'feminine' for implicit difference is controversial but, according to Cixous, it reflects her argument that women are closer to the unconscious than men who have had to repress more in order to take on the larger roles they have historically had to play in socio-political terms (Writing the Feminine, pp.133-34). In this way, 'masculine', for Cixous, is linked to the (phallocentric) social order, and 'feminine' relates to what is other to, and different from, that 'masculine' order. Cixous's 'masculine', therefore, both is and is not linked to men and, likewise, her 'feminine' does and does not relate to women. The féminine of écriture féminine is thus a term for something which is other to the social order, other than language itself, and yet at the same time continues to have associations with women and with the way women (can) express themselves; for the latter reasons, it therefore also continues to be associated with
the social order. Such ambiguity and excess meaning are in this context positive qualities, displacing and disrupting rather than replacing one definition with another which would perhaps be equally authoritative, authoritarian and enclosing. The strategic power of Cixous’s ‘feminine’ is that, conceptually, it remains outside of and excess to the enclosure of definition.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that, in Cixous’s work, ‘feminine’ can be conceived only in terms of what ‘masculine’ is not, which would thus seem to reinforce rather than challenge binary oppositions, and to assume that ‘masculine’ is more readily definable than ‘feminine’. Similarly, her privileging of ‘feminine’ over ‘masculine’ may appear simply to be a reversal of the traditional hierarchies of oppositional thought. Even while criticising the binary structure, her very use of these polarising terms as a polarisation would seem to maintain it. On the other hand, however, this point illustrates the difficulty or impossibility of conceiving meaning without being confined within oppositional thought. It would seem to be impossible even to imagine what the ‘feminine’ might be without relating it to its oppositional other, the ‘masculine’.

In whatever way écriture féminine is understood, it is therefore both implicitly and explicitly placed in an oppositional relation to traditional (masculine) discourse. In ‘Le Rire de la Méduse’, Cixous explains and justifies this gendering of traditional discourse as masculine:

L’écriture a été jusqu’à présent, de façon beaucoup plus étendue, répressive, qu’on le soupçonne ou qu’on l’avoue, gérée par une économie libidinale et culturelle – donc politique, typiquement masculine – un lieu où s’est reproduit plus ou moins consciemment, et de façon redoutable car souvent occulté, ou paré des charmes mystifiants de la fiction, le refoulement de la femme. (p.42)
It is thus not so much the discourse of individual men which represses (and oppresses) women, because, as she concedes, individual men too are imprisoned by phallogocentrism, but a discourse determined by a 'masculine' (phallogocentric) economy (p.40). According to Cixous, the 'masculine' economy is a political and libidinal economy of appropriation, upon which Western society is based, and which extends to relationships between individuals. In the 'masculine' economy, desire for the other is inscribed through the desire to possess the other. For Cixous, an alternative, 'feminine' economy does not exist but could be envisaged if there was a radical transformation in society with attendant, although as yet unthinkable, effects on the way individuals relate to each other ('Sorties', pp.152-53). Cixous considers that this would involve recognition, respect and appreciation of the other's difference without fear of that difference and without the need to possess or annihilate. However, despite this relational differentiation between Cixous's 'masculine' and 'feminine' economies, it is unclear exactly what constitutes 'masculine', 'traditional' or even 'phallogocentric' discourse or writing in her work. Nonetheless, Cixous's gendering of traditional discourse makes her écriture féminine in itself an oppositional concept (in the sense of both 'binary' and 'counter'). It is thus a two-fold political (feminist) strategy: on the one hand, it is concerned with finding ways to express (sexual) difference(s) while, at the same time, it claims and reveals that language and discourse is already gendered (and therefore also already political). In this latter connection, Cixous frequently uses the term, 'L'Empire du Propre' in 'Sorties' to refer to Western culture, thus reinforcing her point that its phallogocentrism is both deep-rooted and yet culturally and historically specific. Her use of the Aristotelian notion of the Proper connotes both these aspects: Ancient Greek
thought is not only the authoritative root of Western culture but also points to a historical moment of origin.

Since Cixous's conceptualisation of the 'feminine' refers to implicit difference, the implication is that it must thus always be contextual to specific individuals, groups, cultures or historical periods, and therefore is in itself an unstable and changing concept. Moreover, Cixous's liberatory claims for écriture féminine suggest that to express, and particularly to write, the 'feminine' is eventually to enable change in the 'masculine'. This would in turn imply that both the 'masculine' and 'feminine' must be (potentially at least) always changeable and changing concepts – and indeed interdependent and fluid ones. It may not (yet) be possible to speak and think outside the binary structure but, in the case of Cixous's ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, no stable meaning can be attached to either signifier nor indeed to the terms of their opposition. In this scenario of indeterminacy, the idea of ‘feminine’ as always excess to any meaning attributed to it is thus a useful one which enables some sense of a concept of meaning outside the binary system to be apprehended. Conceptually, its import has even wider horizons than this, however, since, although appropriating the binary system for political purposes, its excess begins to call that very system into question.

If Cixous does not offer any definitions of écriture féminine, she does nevertheless describe its characteristics. These fall into three inter-related areas: 'voice', the body, and the text as 'elsewhere'. In ‘Sorties’, Cixous suggests that 'femininity' in writing can be detected in the form of rhythm, musicality, resonances and vibrations – as a privileging of voice: 'écriture et voix se tressent, se trament et en s’échangeant, continuité de l’écriture/rythme de la voix, se coupent le souffle, font haleter le texte ou le composent de suspens, de silences, l’aphonisent ou le déchirent de cris’ (p.170). By ‘voice’, Cixous is
referring to rhythms of speech, which she considers bear traces of the echo of the primal
song, ‘la première musique, celle de la première voix d’amour, que toute femme préserve
vivante’, traces from the pre-linguistic, pre-oedipal relationship with the mother (p. 172).
For Cixous, ‘voice’ also conveys rhythms of the body from unconscious drives. She
considers that reverberations from the unconscious can come to the surface and can be
recognised in rhythms and musicality in language and writing.

Cixous thus proposes the pre-oedipal as a conceptual space, but in practical terms
she appears to have developed its connections with ‘voice’ from her own memories of the
songs her German mother sang to her in her infancy. In the essay, ‘La Venue à l’écriture’,
she maintains that even though she writes in French, she makes connections with the
rhythm and inflections of the German language in her writing. Nonetheless, Cixous’s
positing of the pre-oedipal in this way as a source of ‘feminine’ expression has proved
controversial. *Ecriture féminine* is rejected by materialist feminists for working only in
(and on) the Imaginary and thus being, ultimately, of little socio-political consequence.
Nevertheless, although Cixous certainly values the unconscious as a source of expression
of difference, she does not speak from within psychoanalysis (in the way, for example,
that Kristeva as a psychoanalyst does). Indeed, Cixous’s relationship with
psychoanalytical theory is in itself controversial since she subscribes neither to Freudian
accounts of sexual difference nor to Lacanian accounts of the unbridgeable schism from
the pre-oedipal upon the subject’s constitution in language.

If the notion of ‘voice’ is disputed by Cixous’s critics, her emphasis on women’s
bodies is perhaps even more so. In ‘Sorties’, women are exhorted to ‘write their bodies’:
‘Ecris-toi: il faut que ton corps se fasse entendre’ (p. 180). This command involves two
different actions. First, Cixous herself states that her own body is very closely involved in
her writing and that it marks all her books – as rhythm (‘La Venue’, p.64); the body is thus conceptualised as a valuable medium of expression of the unconscious. Secondly, in ‘Le Rire de la Méduse’, Cixous also calls on women to write their bodies in the sense of writing about their bodies, about their own desires and pleasures which she considers have been unexpressed in Western culture (pp.47-48). Whether Cixous’s strategy of ‘writing the body’ is read as material or conceptual, therefore, it is concerned with giving expression to what has been silenced, of bringing into presence what has been absent given that women’s own perceptions of their bodies, desires and pleasures have historically been unrepresented. Cixous’s exhortations for women to celebrate their bodies in writing thus have a dual purpose: on the one hand, to challenge traditional representations and, on the other, to recover (and discover) what has been lost.

The problem with Cixous’s celebration of the body, some of her critics argue, is that it is impossible to disentangle women’s bodies from traditional representations which have historically justified and reinforced women’s socio-cultural subordination as sexual objects and maternal vessels. Even individual experiences of bodily functions are never totally untainted by socio-cultural attitudes. However, this is precisely the point that Annie Leclerc addresses in her celebration of the body in *Parole de femme*. In this text, Leclerc insists that a change of attitude towards menstruation can alter both the psychological and the physical experience of it (p. 48). She argues that if women can accept and welcome their periods instead of experiencing them in terms of the dominant social discourse of pain and shame, then they may well actually experience less pain. She suggests that publicity for Tampax, for example, plays on this aspect of shame. Tampax advertisements applaud the way the product allows women to act normally – that is as if they do not have their period. Leclerc’s point is that this plays into social requirements
that women’s periods must be sanitised and hidden and in this way it reinforces the repression of women’s own experiences of their body cycles, denying them their biological specificity. Similarly, her valorisation and celebration of the joys and pleasures of pregnancy, childbirth, and breast-feeding insist that women’s actual experiences do not necessarily (have to) conform to dominant social attitudes. Although criticised for her lack of attention to socio-political concerns, Leclerc’s position, which might usefully gloss that of Cixous, is that a transformation in attitudes towards women’s bodies can help to give women the confidence they need in order to work towards social change.\(^{17}\) In these terms, reclaiming the body in writing can impact on the way women both are perceived and perceive themselves – and in this way can be said to have an effect on women’s identity.

In ‘Sorties’, in addition to the ‘feminine’ effects of voice and body, Cixous values the textual space itself as an ‘elsewhere’: ‘S’il y a un ailleurs qui peut échapper à la répétition infernale, c’est par là, où ça s’écrit, où ça rêve, où ça invente les nouveaux mondes’ (p.132). For Cixous, the text is thus a space and place of exploration, speculation and creation of new potentialities of meaning and identity which do not (necessarily) reproduce the (phallocentric) system. For women, therefore, writing is empowering and liberating – a way to imagining and inventing new realities. In ‘L’Auteur en vérité’, Cixous considers that the poem, ‘cet hybride de musique et de langue’, with its possibilities of liberation from the laws of grammar, language and gender, can produce ‘quelque chose de la vie mystérieuse et inarrêtable’, of the unconscious, of the ‘feminine’.\(^{18}\) Most of Cixous’s own writing is poetical: in her fiction, which will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters, she explores the possibilities of writing differently in terms of both content and form. Conceptually, *écriture féminine*
thus has vast implications: while questioning the deep-rooted connotations of language and their power to oppress, it asserts the liberating value of polysemic expression for women and it works to liberate both language and women's identities from that oppression. In practice, however, the question of whether writing can bring about transformation of this nature is more problematical – and this is precisely one of the issues which my subsequent chapters address.

The critical reception of both Cixous’s theoretical and fictional writing has been extreme, ranging from adulatory espousals of her every word to outright rejection of her texts as utopian, elitist and alienating. The effect has been to create something of an over-investment in the concept of _écriture féminine_ as a category as well as in Cixous and her own writing as role models to be either desired or rejected. Consequently, Cixous’s work has generated much debate on the viability of unifying terms such as _écriture féminine_ or indeed ‘women’s writing’. To some extent, such umbrella terms are important for the consolidation of collective concerns since, politically, collective action can often be more effective than individual acts. A writing identity which proclaims women as women can provide a political position of strength to counter women’s general exclusion from the literary canon and to give expression to women’s voices. Alternatively, however, some women writers are of the opinion that positively asserting their gender creates the risk of ‘ghettoisation’ and a return to ‘women’s writing’ as an undervalued, secondary category in relation to the literary canon. For example, in Christiane Baroche’s introduction to a special issue on women’s writing of the journal, _Sud_, this author challenges the very categorisation, ‘women’s writing’:

Il n’y a pas d’écriture féminine ni masculine, il y a l’ECRITURE [...] elles ont donné de la voix, de leur voix, tour à tour essayiste, polémiste, poète, nouvelliste, écrivain toujours. Je voudrais,
More recently, however, work in Gender Studies, Men's Studies and Gay Studies has highlighted precisely the need to problematise and talk about 'men's writing'.

Julia Kristeva's contribution to this debate is characteristically non-partisan, although it is productive. In an interview on women and the avant-garde, she concedes that belonging to a collective group or category such as 'women's writing' or 'the avant-garde' can be a cohesive and supportive _stage_ for a writer, but she argues above all for singularity in order to allow full expression of individual and diverse voices.

Acknowledging the place of _écriture féminine_ in the academy, Kristeva nonetheless stresses that, although the academy has a part to play in the development of culture, it remains elitist and marginal. Although accepting that writing differently is part of a project of change, she emphasises that it is also important to pay attention to content and present 'new objects of thought'. Moreover, she maintains that in order to have either artistic or political impact on contemporary culture, it is becoming increasingly necessary to take account of and gain access to the mass media. Kristeva does not underestimate the difficulties of the negotiation which in this case must take place between accessibility and artistic creation but argues that 'la lisibilité, la clarté, la simplicité' are the keys to communicability (Avant Garde, p.173). Elsewhere Kristeva warns that the evident banalisation of popular culture is a serious threat to the future of literature, and as such endangers 'l'espace psychique' of the individual which relies on the spiritual dimension of art and literature for its well-being. While it is unclear exactly what Kristeva considers the delimitations to be between popular culture and literature, and between banalisation and accessibility, her emphasis on the reception of artistic creation is
particularly fruitful, and indeed its textual form – reading – is the principal focus of this study.

Despite the controversy surrounding *écriture féminine*, Cixous's claims for the liberating potential of writing would seem to provide a useful conceptual framework within which to continue considering writing by women, although the ways in which her ideas are used might usefully be re-evaluated. My own contention is that it is particularly productive, although it is certainly not simple, to attempt to untangle writing by women from *écriture féminine* (and thus from both avant-garde and marginal connections) and also from 'women's writing' as a genre, while, at the same time, continuing to be informed by, and to engage with, Cixous’s thinking on the transformative qualities of literature. Consequently, if, as Cixous suggests, writing can be philosophically and politically liberating (for women), the implications are that reading itself must be part of that process of change.

**READING**

Cixous’s vision of writing as both a transformative act and a transformative space has directly prompted several critics to address the part that reading might play in this framework. Martha Noel Evans, for example, has emphasised the exchange that takes place between writing and reading and she has thus made the connection between liberation through writing and liberation through reading; more specifically, Beatrice Cameron has pointed to the subjective nature of reading and, for her, reading is self-discovery and a response to a specific other – in her own case, to Cixous. Addressing the issue of gender in reading, Susan Sellers has suggested that the gender position of the reader is an important factor in terms of both collusion with and resistance to the text s/he
is reading (p.193), and Lynn Kettler Penrod has made the point that reading can be a
process of initiation for women, a way of finding oneself, a rebirth. The place of gender
in reading is of course of particular relevance to my enquiry and these responses to
Cixous's work raise further questions about how relations between the individual (reader)
and a collective group are negotiated in reading. However, before proceeding to a
discussion of current, feminist-based work of this nature, I shall contextualise both this
body of work and my own project within the parameters of contemporary reading theory.

Following Roland Barthes's renowned essay, 'La Mort de l'auteur', in which
Barthes propounds the birth of the reader following the author's demise as authority over
the text, there has been a marked shift of interest in literary criticism towards the creative
power of the reader. Most contemporary theorists of reading thus posit reading as
interpretive, interactive and creative, but the ways in which the reader is formulated in
their respective schemas of reading vary according to their different perspectives.

Interestingly, the relationship between the individual and the collective is the prime
concern of Stanley Fish, who focuses on the relationship between the individual reader
and what he terms 'interpretive communities' in the interpretation of literature and the
production of meaning. According to Fish, readers are always already products of a
community. The individual reader thus shares perceptions, interpretive strategies and
contexts with various groups (intellectual, theoretical, ideological, social) with which s/he
has shifting allegiances. The communities therefore shape the reader. For Fish, such
relationships explain the interpretive differences between groups of readers. In a different
way, Norman Holland is also concerned with the connections between subjectivity and
collectivity in reading. From a case study of the ways in which 'real readers' 'make
sense' of a text, Holland draws conclusions about the nature of the psychological
processes involved in reading. He goes on to elaborate a series of principles of literary experience which he argues constitute the conditions of reading.29

Wolfgang Iser, on the other hand, predicates the concept of ‘the implied reader’ in order to take account of the ‘prestructuring’ of the text’s potential meaning as well as the ‘actualization’ of that potential by the reader.30 Iser’s work is interesting for its formulation of reading as a process as well as for his trajectory from reader response theory to what he terms ‘literary anthropology’. In The Act of Reading, Iser develops concern for ‘what literature does and not what it means’ (p.53), suggesting that textual gaps and silences demand ‘increased productivity on the part of the reader’ (p.210), but his model of text-reader relations is to become increasingly interactive. In Prospecting, he formulates the text as a space of play, which is ‘enabling’ (p.259): the textual space is a place for the reader to obtain unfamiliar experience, to undertake exploration and ‘staged transformation’ (p.260). In this scenario, readers play out scenes of possibilities for themselves which can lead to ‘a chronic process of self-reflection’ (p.281) and even, Iser suggests, to ‘a change of perception’ (p.283).

So far, the reader is conceived as either responding to or interpreting the meaning of the text. These theorists of reading, however, are all concerned with meaning production rather than with any real form of change. Iser’s ‘literary anthropology’ implies that reading might indeed be formative, but theories of intertextuality offer a model of more creative and even transformative reading interaction with the text.

In La Production du texte, Michael Riffaterre makes the reader part of the process of textuality itself – the process which makes the text meaningful: ‘le phénomène littéraire n’est pas seulement le texte, mais aussi son lecteur et l’ensemble des réactions possibles du lecteur au texte – énoncé et énonciation’ (p.9). The reader is thus actively
involved in the creation of the meaning of the text – indeed s/he becomes co-creator of the text. This seemingly democratic status does not, however, give the reader unlimited freedom of interpretation since Riffaterre also emphasises that ‘le texte est un code limitatif et prescriptif’ (p.11). For Riffaterre, therefore, to some extent the text itself always directs the reader’s interpretation.31

In ‘Le Mot, le dialogue et le roman’, Kristeva, originator of the term ‘intertextuality’, argues that no text can function as a closed system. All texts are traversed by traces of and references to other texts as well as by ideological and historical discourses – by what Riffaterre terms ‘l’intertextualité aléatoire’.32 Moreover, readers bring with them to their reading their own personal and cultural baggage, including memories and traces of texts from their past reading. Reading, in this case, becomes a ‘cross-fertilisation’ of what is in the text with each reader’s subjective perspectives.33 Thus at each time of reading, each reader brings different perspectives to the text and takes away different experiences from it. In this sense, the reader is therefore to some extent always changed by his/her reading.

Nonetheless, other theorists propose conditions of more fundamental transformation for the reading subject. In Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative, Ross Chambers argues that reading can produce ‘shifts in desire’ in the reader that not only effect change in the reader (and in what s/he desires) but that also, importantly, lead to social change. For Chambers, ‘to change what people desire is, in the long run, the way to change without violence the way things are’.34 In this text, he is concerned with the role that reading can play in the processes of gradual change within a power system. Reading is a space where a certain amount of disturbance to that system can occur and which, Chambers argues, can lead to instances of localised
change. In a different way, Susan Rubin Suleiman lauds the transformative power of reading: ‘Potentially, every genuine reading experience is a life-changing encounter, even though few individual books can be said to have truly transformed one’s life. The transforming effects are cumulative, each new work contributing its own small parcel’. Suleiman’s argument is that reading is an identificatory experience, whereby the reader can put ‘the self into play’ (p.229). In such ‘autobiographical reading’, readers can make connections between their own individual experience and the experiences of others (p.8).

While there may thus be resonances between Suleiman’s version of reading and Iser’s ‘literary anthropology’, Suleiman’s point is somewhat different. She argues that powerful reading experiences can lead to change in reality.

Gender is not a specific concern in Suleiman’s *Risking Who One Is*, although in that text she does value the gender ambiguities in Angela Carter’s work for their potential to initiate questions about ‘what it is to be a woman’ (p.139). However, a growing body of feminist work is examining the roles that gender plays in reading. Judith Fetterley’s ‘resisting reader’ and Kay Boardman’s ‘renegade reading’, for example, are formulations of reading positions which explore the possibilities of reading ‘as a woman’ and finding new spaces from which women can read classic, male-authored literature. Shoshana Felman’s work goes further, however, and she suggests that for women reading is about change — about becoming a woman, a feminist, a sexually differentiated individual.

On the other hand, Sara Mills, while examining ways in which gender is implicated in reading, problematises precisely the possibility of (talking about) reading as a woman. In *Gendering the Reader*, she argues that gender cannot be completely isolated as a factor in reading and that feminist studies must also take into account other aspects, such as race, class and sexuality as well as the individual subjectivity of the reader (pp.17-18).
Likewise, for Jane Miller, 'the reader is a person in history, a person with a history' (Seductions, p.154). Although foregrounding the role of gender in the reading experience, Miller posits the reader as a gendered subjective individual formed by means of connections and conflicts with different groups (class, race, sexuality). From her empirical research in Gendering the Reader, Mills nonetheless does deduce that it is possible for both men and women to read as or like a feminist’ (pp.41-42). In Feminism and the Politics of Reading, Lynne Pearce would to some extent seem to concur with Mills’s findings but, ultimately, she problematises even this, as her examples of real readers (including herself) suggest that the relationship between the individual reader and the feminist interpretive community is unpredictably variable. Her study of the affect in reading attempts to account for disagreement between feminist readers, but it also suggests that the feminist part of an individual’s reading identity can disappear completely if it is supplanted by personal and emotional factors – when, in Pearce’s terms, a hermeneutic reading becomes (in part) an ‘implicated’ reading.37

These feminist studies of reading are interesting, but their concern with gender in reading relates to ways in which women (might) read rather than with how those interactions can change the reader herself. In Sexuality and the Reading Encounter, Emma Wilson’s account of reading focuses on sexuality rather than gender per se but her formulation of reading is particularly interactive and transformative. Wilson espouses Judith Butler’s formulation of identity as an ‘effect of a performance and of a set of identifications’, which she usefully glosses to produce her own understanding of identity as a set of intersections between different subject positions and different aspects of identity which give a general sense of selfhood.38 In reading, which she posits as a ‘desiring activity’ (p.9), a ‘(sexual) encounter’ (p.27) and an ‘erotic conflict’ (p.57),
Wilson argues that texts have a formative function if they unsettle rather than secure the reader's identity. According to Wilson, the (trans)formative effects of reading go beyond the reading encounter itself in order to effect change in the reader and she likens this to the way 'the formative effects' of psychoanalytical transference continue beyond its revelation as a fiction (p.20).

Feminist studies of reading clearly have a mixed agenda. On the one hand, many feminist critics are concerned to find new ways for women to approach fictional texts and, on the other, to assess how far gender is implicated in reading. A smaller number (Felman, Wilson, Suleiman) attempt to explore ways in which reading can have an impact on the reader's identity – how readers can be changed by their reading. However, of the theorists of reading discussed, only Ross Chambers explicitly makes the connection between transformation in the reader and social change. The processes involved in such transformation are nonetheless complex, and crucially, both Chambers and Riffaterre propose a dynamics of text/reader relations which make the act of reading a negotiation between the reader's creativity and his or her positioning by the text.

Many different models of reading have been proposed by contemporary theorists, from 'praxis' and 'self-defence', from 'transaction' and 'encounter' to 'romance', 'poaching', 'prospecting', 'manoeuvring' and 'speculation'. These may in fact be either paradigms or metaphors but, in different ways, they allow for the conceptualisation of both the relationship between text and reader and of what happens in reading. Moreover, since a trope comes with an attendant vocabulary, each trope opens up a different range of approaches to the reading process itself. In Reading Dialogics, Lynne Pearce proposes 'dialogue' as yet another model of reading. Reading Bakhtin, she suggests that his theory of dialogism within the text could productively be extended to inform
text/reader relations and, in particular, questions of gender in reading. Importantly, Pearce considers that the subject (which she formulates as always provisional) is always in the process of reconstitution and that this is effected through dialogic ‘interaction with others’ (p.9). In the context of reading, Pearce’s trope of the dialogue thus allows for the dynamic of reader/text relations suggested by Riffaterre, by Chambers and by Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality as well as for the potential of reader (trans)formation. ‘Dialogue’ is therefore also my own tropological model of reading but my investigation of the reading process is somewhat different from Pearce’s subsequent enquiry into the affective dimension of reading, since my project explores ways in which the reader’s identity both interacts with and is changed by the text. The nature of that identity is the subject of the next section.

**IDENTITY**

Although feminism has become a broad and diffuse discipline, there remain ongoing areas of common concern. Both women’s identity and women’s subjectivity are recurrent topics on the feminist agenda, approached from either psychoanalytical, sociological, political or textual axes, or from such perspectives as ethnicity, sexuality or gender. Although it can be argued that these are all different aspects of a sense of self, one particular aspect of identity such as race or motherhood may of course be the focus of specific interest at any one time. On the one hand, the very multiplicity of possible approaches fosters fruitful interdisciplinary discussion and debate but on the other hand, it may also lead to confusion about how ‘identity’ and ‘subjectivity’ are understood in any particular case, since each approach has its own set of theoretical reference points and terminology.
Commenting on Luce Irigaray's complex work, Margaret Whitford formulates a helpful distinction between subjectivity and identity which is pertinently applicable to psychoanalytically informed discussions of the textual such as my own:

Subjectivity is a structure, or a position of enunciation. It is not identity; [...] but that structure would be empty without the imaginary: representations are what flesh it out. So the symbolic is structure (form) which is given content by the imaginary, and the imaginary pours itself into the available structures to form representations. Subjectivity, then, belongs to the symbolic, but it is empty without the imaginary; identity is imaginary, but it takes a symbolic (representational) form. In Whitford’s explanation, subjectivity could thus be said to be socially placed whereas identity is imaginary. They are nevertheless interdependent. Identity is constituted in the imaginary but must flow into the symbolic structures of the/a subject in order to be given form and become represented.

A useful juxtaposition to Whitford’s account is Rosi Braidotti’s assertion that ‘identity is a retrospective notion’ and that subjectivity is refigurable. For Braidotti, subjectivity is thus the most important locus of change since it can be conceptualised as mobile whereas identity always bears traces of the past and is therefore always at risk of being fixed as a unitary notion. Braidotti’s refining of identity as retrospective is salutary but it does not mean that identity is thus unchangeable. Indeed it is not, since the very notion of retrospectiveness in this context is equivalent to a sense of becoming: the present continually becomes part of the past – and thus modifies it. Moreover, Braidotti’s understanding of identity implicitly accommodates the portions of identity which are imposed from outside yet which become a part of that identity.

This is an important point because herein lies feminism’s double bind. On the one hand, the group identity ‘women’ provides a positive sense of connection and belonging but, on the other hand, it encloses women negatively in others’ perceptions of what
women are, have been or are supposed to be. Moreover, the identity ‘women’ creates another dilemma, since although it might be both politically cohesive and individually empowering, it is questionable whether it adequately accommodates the diversity which exists between individual women and between groups of women. However, if the concept of ‘women’s identity’ is rejected, the relations between individual women and the collectivity ‘women’ and even ‘feminism’ are called into question. This problematic is of course not new since it contributed both to the general fragmentation of feminism in the 1980s as well as to its ongoing renewal. Indeed, contemporary feminism is characterised by its continual negotiations with diversity. Nonetheless, this double-bind is still pertinent to feminism as it is to other groupings and communities; on the one hand, new issues create new pockets of confrontation between diversity and collectivity, and between the individual and the group, and on the other, feminism’s (and indeed any group’s) own identity is partly constituted by perceptions exterior to it – by others’ perceptions of it.

Braidotti’s formulation of subjectivity is useful because it conceptualises the structure of the subject itself as changing, but Whitford’s point that the structure is empty without imaginary content to ‘flesh it out’ is an important intervention. Braidotti suggests, however, that representations of identity tend to become frozen and rigid, which is precisely why it is crucial that it is subjectivity that is construed as potentially mobile. Whitford, on the other hand, importantly, emphasises that the two terms – subjectivity and identity – are interdependent. Hence, in the context of this current study into the transformative potential of literature – a study particularly concerned with ‘becomings’ – this section attends to both subjectivity and identity in order to conceptualise, on the one hand, the possibility of changing identities and, on the other, changing (social) subjectivities. To this end, the theoretical work of both Kristeva and Cixous contributes
interesting although not unproblematic concepts for understanding the dynamics of identity.

Kristeva's conceptual linguistic and textual subject, *le sujet en procès*, is a speaking subject which (following both Lacan and Benveniste) is constituted within language and by language. Nevertheless, Kristeva's speaking subject is somewhat different from the Lacanian subject which, once constituted as a subject in the Symbolic, in the social order of language and of law (of the father), is irrevocably split from the pre-oedipal. In *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Kristeva theorises two linguistic elements, the semiotic and the symbolic, which are both part of the constitution of the subject and of meaning. This linguistic symbolic relates to syntax, grammar and the rules of language, and the semiotic is associated with the pre-oedipal — with the pre-linguistic relationship between mother and child, with drives, body rhythms, silence, plurality, outside of and before the symbolic laws of time and difference (p. 26). Nevertheless, according to Kristeva, it is impossible to speak only in the semiotic since it is the symbolic laws of language and syntax which enable understandable communication. In *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Kristeva demonstrates through an analysis of language in avant-garde poetry that the effect of the semiotic on symbolic language can be identified in the form of musicality, rhythms, contradictions, disruptions and silences. The semiotic breaks through the resistance of the symbolic, and meaning is thus created through a play of both semiotic and symbolic elements.

The Lacanian idea of the subject, 'irremediably split in and by language', implies that the unconscious cannot be expressed other than by and within the Symbolic. Kristeva's argument that the semiotic disrupts the symbolic therefore appears to counter Lacan's hypothesis in some way but this differentiation is not necessarily so clear-cut.
Indeed, the relationship between Kristeva's symbolic and Lacan's Symbolic Order is interpreted in different ways by different commentators. On the one hand, for example, Elizabeth Grosz considers that Kristeva's symbolic is an alternative to Lacan's Symbolic whereas Kelly Oliver interprets both Kristeva's symbolic and semiotic as part of the Lacanian Symbolic. However, Kristeva's very choice of the term 'symbolic' would seem at once to associate her concept with the Lacanian Symbolic while at the same time to disturb it.

According to Kristeva, neither meaning – nor subject – are stable but rather, both are continually made and remade in a 'va-et-vient' of mobility and resistance between the symbolic and semiotic. In 'Le Sujet en procès', she stresses that her term, *le sujet en procès*, is therefore indicative of the dynamism (process) and the struggle (trial) that is its character. Kristeva's speaking subject is therefore a mobile concept. It is, however, constituted as a linguistic and textual structure rather than a social one. Nevertheless, it has been appropriated in more general terms by feminism as an enabling concept. Indeed, Marilyn Edelstein points out that since language is a social practice, Kristeva's speaking subject is actually a social one, and John Lechte sees it as 'a bodily subject [...] the subject as practice in fact'. Moreover, Kristeva herself has applied the concept of *le sujet en procès* to women as social subjects (*Julia Kristeva Interviews*, p.269). Pertinently to this study, she also applies it to readers of texts (*Julia Kristeva Interviews*, p.190).

Although the pre-oedipal is sometimes conceptualised as a discursive space linked to the 'feminine', it is important to clarify that Kristeva herself does not relate the semiotic to any sort of 'feminine' essence nor indeed to 'feminine' at all. Indeed, in 'La Femme, ce n'est jamais ça', Kristeva rejects any enclosing definition of 'feminine' or 'woman', favouring, in 'A partir de Polylogue', 'une conception du féminin pour laquelle
il y aurait autant de “feminins” que de femmes’. Kristeva thus makes it clear that she is interested in the singularity of individuals and not in any form of (collective) women’s identity.

Kristeva’s sujet en procès thus allows conceptually for a mobile, dynamic subject (and reader) while leaving identity open to individual interventions. In other words, it allows for representation but does not provide (or prescribe) it. The chapters which follow explore a range of possible interventions, but first, an understanding of sexual identity which would seem to complement Kristeva’s speaking subject is to be found in Cixous’s work.

In ‘Sorties’, Cixous formulates a new understanding of ‘bisexuality’:

Bisexualité, c’est à dire repérage en soi, individuellement, de la présence, diversement manifeste et insistante selon chaque un ou une, des deux sexes, non-exclusion de la différence ni d’un sexe, et à partir de cette “permission” que l’on se donne, multiplication des effets d’inscription du désir, sur toutes les parties de mon corps et de l’autre corps. (pp.155-56)

Cixous’s understanding of ‘bisexuality’ is a relational concept rather than the traditional one of a utopian fantasy of originary wholeness. Her version is developed from Freud’s original bisexuality, but it is not bound by it. According to Cixous, ‘there is always, in every human being […] a complex relationship between different libidinal economies which would be passive and active, constantly binding and unbinding themselves, exchanging, spending, and retaining’ (Writing the Feminine, p.131). She proffers a reconsideration of bisexuality as a libidinal and relational notion which would allow a multiplicity of sexual differences to exist.

The first section of this chapter emphasised the problematic but liberating aspects of Cixous’s terminology, whereby, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ connote fluid,
interdependent and yet opposing concepts. In her 'bisexuality', these terms relate more obviously to sexual identity but appear to have both libidinal and cultural reference points. However, latterly, Cixous has distanced herself from the term, 'bisexuality', relating it contextually to the historical moment of 1970s feminism, but I would argue that it is nonetheless useful as a concept which goes beyond the binary nature of its semantic roots. In Cixous's bisexuality, both 'masculinity' and 'femininity' exist within both women and men but are revealed and repressed in varying amounts within each individual as a play of differences. The dynamism and tension implicit in the play of differences is central: individuals are not determined by a particular balance of masculinity and femininity, but are constantly involved in a process of movement, both between and incorporating the extremes of difference, yet also resisting enclosure by them. This can be seen as an enriching process, one which enables both women and men to break out of imprisoning sexual identities. Those who accept and welcome this play of differences within themselves can open up more easily to multiple interactions and relations with others. Cixous's concept of 'bisexuality' is not, however, necessarily linked to sexual practice or sexual orientation, but she does suggest that a diversity of enriching relationships (erotic and non-erotic) would become possible. Moreover, this 'bisexuality' does not appear to discriminate against or privilege any particular sexuality. It is thus a liberating notion which allows for a wide diversity of sexual differences that neither exclude nor conform to particular sexual practices or identities. In this way, the concept allows for alternative ways of considering sexuality, sexual identity and, importantly, gender politics: conceptually, it opens up infinite potentialities of 'being a woman' and 'being a man' beyond the relational hierarchies of a 'masculine' economy.
In these terms, sexual difference no longer relates only to the difference between men and women but also the differences that exist between – and within – individuals. For Cixous, therefore, ‘bisexuality’ is thus not simply sexual orientation (although it may involve that), neither is it simply the incorporation in one sex of sexual attributes commonly assigned to the other (although it may involve that too), but it is a relational concept: ‘c’est la possibilité de se prolonger d’autre, d’être dans un rapport avec l’autre de telle manière que je passe dans l’autre sans détruire l’autre’. It entails an opening-up to a changing play of potential differences in oneself and in the other, and thus sexual identity is both dynamic and an ongoing process.

Cixous’s ‘bisexuality’ allows for infinite possibilities but, although this is (potentially) liberating, this very infiniteness does not facilitate representation. As a formulation of identity, it thus remains a problematic concept precisely because it is a concept. Whereas ‘bisexuality’ based on an understanding of sexual orientation or sexual practice may offer a representational political identity which arguably unsettles the boundaries of the homosexual/heterosexual binary opposition, Cixous’s formulation, although potentially both politically and personally liberating, remains on a conceptual level. This does not mean, however, that it is not relevant to the current discussion. Indeed, it is most pertinent, precisely because it allows identity itself to be thought as a dynamic process.

In this way, reading Cixous’s ‘bisexuality’ together with Kristeva’s sujet en procès produces the possibility of both a mobile formulation of subjectivity and a dynamic concept of identity which is applicable to (and also beyond) feminist interests in changing perceptions of women’s identity. Moreover, despite the differences between Cixous’s ‘feminine’ and Kristeva’s ‘semiotic’, there are some parallels which can be drawn
between them; for example, they both relate conceptually to the pre-oedipal and they both connote difference from and disruption to the symbolic social order. Such equivalences suggest that these two inter-relating concepts (since subjectivity and identity are interdependent) might therefore productively inform each other in response to some feminist critiques of Cixous's and Kristeva's respective work.

Although it is clear that both Kristeva and Cixous are concerned with women as individuals rather than with any specific form of feminine identity, at times each of them has been categorised as essentialist. Cixous's use of 'feminine' has had trouble throwing off its connotations of the Eternal Feminine, and her celebratory use of women's bodies in her writing has been similarly problematic. Likewise, Kristeva's theoretical and speaking position within psychoanalysis, and particularly her valorisation of motherhood, has fed into fears of a reinforcement of heterosexual norms and traditional maternal roles. At the root of many criticisms seems to be the conflation of difference with differences. Both Kristeva and Cixous value difference as singularity and diversity, and their theoretical concepts of the 'semiotic' and 'feminine' respectively allow such differences to be expressed textually, but they do not promote difference as any form of feminine essence. However, this position in itself creates problems for feminism, since it implicitly rejects the identity 'women' as an identity.

In Reading Kristeva, Kelly Oliver suggests that Kristeva's sujet en procès provides the key to this dilemma and she posits women's identity as an 'identity-in-process', one which is tentative and never complete – and, I would add, dynamic. Rather than seeing femininity as 'one of a series of options in the Symbolic, not a necessary result of biological sex' with Alison Ainley, it is the continual movement between positions that Kristeva's sujet en procès (and Cixous's 'bisexuality') allow which is particularly useful
for feminism – and for this current study of fictional texts. Femininity can thus become not one of a series of options but in itself a series of options experienced in the Symbolic and constituted by a singular and continual play of elements of difference within each individual. Cixous’s ‘feminine’ helpfully glosses these elements of difference: there is not one ‘feminine’, since ‘feminine’ is anything – and everything – that ‘masculine’ (or the social order) is not. The play of differences allows for multiple subject positions and multiple and continually changing identities within those subject positions. The subject is in this way always a subject in process and on trial – a subject in the process of becoming; identity is never fixed or complete.

Moreover, in this formulation, the singularity of individual identity is not necessarily negated when the subject connects with a collective identity. For example, a woman may thus be an individual with specific and singular needs and characteristics, but she may also be a woman in relation to women as a group – even if this is experienced only in an intermittent way. This has important implications for women both as individuals and as groups (and, I would also suggest, for other identity groupings). Identity conceived as a dynamic process works against notions of essence and nature, enabling a blurring of categories, opening up potentialities, and allowing for both connection with and resistance to different identities. It also allows the possibility of going beyond the oppositional question of whether or not it is productive to think in terms of a collective identity. Belonging to a (women’s) group offers a valuable sense of cohesion, unity and mutual support. However, the identity ‘women’ is always at risk of (re-)enclosure in the categories and perceptions from which women are trying to escape. A collective identity is both liberating and restrictive. To think in terms of identity as a dynamic process enables the possibility of a productive tension between the individual
and the collective. A group identity would therefore not be binding or imprisoning, nor would it simply be perceived as a stage. Individual and collective identities are thus not necessarily mutually exclusive but they co-exist; individuals can move between them – and in and out of them. Individual identity can thus be understood in terms of ongoing mobile intersections of different subject positions and different aspects of identity.

For feminism, changing notions of women’s identities are important for women’s perceptions of themselves but they are also important in a more material way. Alternative formulations of sexual identity and arrangements of gender politics foster changes in attitudes, in relationships, in real lives, but even more fundamentally, they call into question the social structures which underpin the status quo. Material, social change therefore becomes possible even if, as Tina Chanter maintains, these changes will necessarily be limited since power systems always (re-)adapt themselves to disruptions and challenges.  

Above all, both Kristeva’s and Cixous’s work emphasises the role of the textual in the process of identity. Cixous’s rather utopian proposals for identity may rely on the imaginary but, as Judith Still points out, utopian visions are important ethically, politically and theoretically (‘A Feminine Economy’, p.55). Theories, speculations and visions can stimulate debate and enable both shifts in attitude and possibilities of social change to be envisaged. A dynamic reading of and between Kristeva’s sujet en procès and Cixous’s ‘bisexuality’ opens up the possibility of thinking the interaction between identity and texts. Luce Irigaray’s work provides the conditions of possibility for that interaction.
IRIGARAY

In an interview in 1987, 'Ecrire en tant que femme', Luce Irigaray explains that she values writing as a means of expression and as a method of communication but she appears pessimistic about whether writing differently can change women's socio-cultural situation. Her pessimism in this interview seems to be involved with her concern to stress the extent of issues and areas which need attention in order to bring about the material and symbolic transformations which remain at the heart of her work. For Irigaray, this task is vast and must involve not only new ways of speaking or writing but also fundamentally different ways of thinking, supported by equally radical transformations in social and cultural institutions. Change is required in all these interrelating areas in order to be able to move towards a sexuate culture which will take account equally of women's and men's separate subjectivities.

For Irigaray, the subject is constructed both linguistically and psychologically, but specifically distancing herself from the Lacanian account where women can only exist and express themselves in terms constructed (and dictated) by the Symbolic, she takes a somewhat different position on women's subjectivity. Pointing out that Lacan's discourse is itself a product of the logic of his own constructed all-controlling (phallocentric) Symbolic Order, Irigaray's work explores the conditions of possibility for a specifically feminine subjectivity.

Irigaray's work suggests conceptual possibilities that are difficult to imagine within existing structures of logic and language, but, in Philosophy in the Feminine, Margaret Whitford argues that the function of Irigaray's complex and ambiguous writing is to initiate a dialogue between her work and her readers (p.52). In this respect, Whitford makes reference to the dialogue particular to psychoanalytical transference, which is not
a dialogue of mastery but which entails putting the self into play. Whitford's argument is that if Irigaray's readers approach her work from this perspective, they may be able to engage productively with her challenges (pp.23-25).

In *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Irigaray claims that one of the ways in which women can work towards finding their own subjectivity is to search for ways of expressing themselves specifically as women, a means of expression which she terms *parler-femme*. However, Irigaray's *parler-femme*, in a similar way to Cixous's *écriture féminine*, remains frustratingly obscure since Irigaray argues that *parler-femme* cannot be defined, there being no (non-phallogocentric) metalanguage in which to describe it (p.141). Nevertheless, it is clear that *parler-femme* relates not only to women speaking, or speaking about women, or even speaking as women but rather, it is the concept of a different kind of speaking(-woman) (p.133). Irigaray suggests that *parler-femme* is what phallogocentric discourse and logic is not: fluid, speculative and ambiguous (p.214). Some of Irigaray's own writing could be described in these terms, but Whitford considers it unproductive to make close connections between *parler-femme* and Irigaray's own writing style; she believes that such a strategy is to miss its point. The dialogic nature which she considers to be the function of *parler-femme* is an important interpretation of Irigaray's project because it suggests that the real value of Irigaray’s work lies in its potential for reader engagement and interaction. Indeed, although the concept of *parler-femme* was an important aspect of Irigaray's early work, latterly her focus on language has taken a somewhat different form. In *Sexes et genres*, Irigaray presents the internationally co-ordinated language research in which she is involved: a study of the different ways in which women and men as socio-cultural subjects use language.
Irigaray’s project can perhaps be usefully contextualised in terms of the discussion of the interdependence of subjectivity and identity in the previous section. In this reading, Irigaray’s work offers the conditions of possibility of alternative formulations of feminine subjectivity but it is not prescriptive: ‘Ne figez pas vos rêves ou désirs en représentations uniques et définitives. Vous avez tant de continents à explorer que vous donner des frontières reviendrait à ne pas “jouir” de toute votre “nature”’ (Ce Sexe, p.202). Irigaray does not simply present a new set of identities or representations, which, in their turn, might fix and limit potential formulations of women’s subjectivity. Rather, she proposes sites of dialogue: not only parler-femme but also the two lips of female sexuality (Ce Sexe, pp.21-32), loving relationships between women, female genealogies and the divine, a placental economy of relations. The purpose of the dialogic nature of Irigaray’s work would thus seem to be to initiate the reader’s creativity – to provoke creative, exploratory responses. It is up to women themselves to create a new feminine imaginary.

The terms ‘imaginary’ and ‘symbolic’ are important in Irigaray’s work but they are ambiguous and fluid concepts and cannot be equated too strictly with the Lacanian Imaginary and Symbolic. In ‘Luce Irigaray and the Female Imaginary: Speaking as a Woman’, Whitford posits Irigaray’s ‘ill-defined’ and ‘richly connotative’ imaginary as an order of identification like that of Lacan’s Imaginary but she stresses that it is not restricted to psychoanalytical understandings of the term; in the same article, she also associates Irigaray’s imaginary both with the phenomenological version (and thus with cultural production), and with the Bachelardian imaginary as a function of the imagination.
Nonetheless, in whatever ways Irigaray’s ‘imaginary’ is interpreted, it has creative connotations in contrast to the rather negative version of Lacan. In *Speculum de l’autre femme*, Irigaray uses the term ‘imaginary’ to refer to the unconscious of Western thought but, importantly, also to what Whitford terms a ‘social imaginary which is taken to be reality’ (*Philosophy in the Feminine*, p.69). Moreover, in *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un*, Irigaray employs the term ‘imaginaire culturel’, which she genders as historically ‘masculine’ – a cultural imaginary constructed from the perspective of men (p.157). This cultural imaginary is the totality of all thought, discourse, symbols, myths, images, and representations in a culture. The cultural imaginary is internalised and thus it both contributes to – and, to some extent, is – reality. This is an important point for the purposes of the current study, because it allows for the impact of cultural production – including that of literature – on lived reality. In this scheme, literature has a part not only in reflecting reality or reinforcing reality but also in constructing reality. It is therefore possible to conceptualise – as Irigaray does – the interdependence of the symbolic and the imaginary. Consequently, the symbolic is potentially alterable by means of changes in the cultural imaginary. Whitford, however, takes this implication even further and suggests that the symbolic is thus *imaginary* in the ordinary sense as well as in the psychoanalytical sense (*Philosophy in the Feminine*, p.67).

Irigaray’s work is concerned with ways to restructure the subject, arguing that women and men can never be equal in socio-cultural or political terms until the feminine has been resymbolised – until women’s own subjectivity comes into being. ‘Feminine’ in Irigaray’s terminology relates, on the one hand, to women specifically (unlike Cixous’s ‘feminine’) but, on the other hand, Irigaray’s ‘feminine’ is also what has not yet been thought: women’s specificity which has not yet existed in a culture controlled by the
discourse and logic of men. Irigaray’s work proposes a feminine imaginary – an imaginary which will enable the hitherto non-existent feminine to exist. It is thus in these terms that the cultural imaginary becomes particularly pertinent. If the feminine is inscribed differently in the cultural imaginary, the implications are thus that this will have an impact on both the individual subject and on social reality.

Irigaray’s work is therefore potentially enabling, as Whitford’s proposal of a dialogic interaction suggests, but its very ambiguity and complexity means that her concepts are frequently misconstrued. Indeed, her argument that women’s specificity must be allowed to exist might seem to presuppose that there is (already) such an implicit specificity that all women share. It is for this reason that Irigaray’s work has frequently been categorised as essentialist, but Whitford argues that there are other, more productive ways to view Irigaray’s work. Irigaray’s so-called essentialism can be seen as part of a process: in order to move towards a culture which allows plurality, it is first necessary for women to exist differently from the way they have been constructed in phallogocentric terms. Irigaray’s concepts of ‘specificity’ and ‘difference’ do not therefore prescribe specific qualities either for individual women or for women collectively but rather, as Whitford argues, challenge her readers to engage with them. Similarly, in ‘The Politics of Ontological Difference’, Rosi Braidotti considers that Irigaray’s insistence that women should ‘think, say and write the feminine’ is valuable as a strategy for self-legitimation and part of a process of becoming. The separatism of women from men, which Irigaray proposes in *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un*, can therefore be productively understood as a stage, in which women may be able to come into existence as women differently, before moving towards a re-integrated culture in which they can exist (with men) on different terms (pp.31-32).
In this way, much of Irigaray’s work can be seen in terms of a process, a challenge and a dialogue, in order to attempt to bring about conceptual shifts in ways of thinking and imagining. Irigaray is not therefore prescribing either any essential concept of ‘feminine’ or any specific feminine identity for women. Nevertheless, her work does have important implications in relation to women’s identities both individually and collectively. Women (writers and readers) can engage with Irigaray’s call for the re-inscription of the (cultural) imaginary to create new feminine fictions, to imagine (themselves) differently, and thus to enable different feminine subjectivities to be lived in reality. Irigaray’s work has implications far beyond the interaction of texts and identity which is the subject of my current study, but her concepts of the cultural imaginary, the possibilities of re-inscribing the feminine, and the interdependence of the symbolic and imaginary allow the conditions of possibility to exist for precisely such an interaction.

**SUMMARY**

Irigaray’s work thus completes the conceptual framework within which the following chapters are placed. Feminist literary criticism claims that the way women have historically been represented in literature has contributed to the way individual women are perceived and to the way they perceive themselves. Images and representations are internalised by women and men alike and thus have an important impact on the way identities of women individually and collectively are constituted psychologically. Irigaray’s notion of the cultural imaginary is a useful way of conceptualising this process. Textual representations and inscriptions form part of our cultural imaginary which in turn is implicated in our identities, in the symbolic, and in social reality. For women, this has historically had a negative effect, but both Cixous and
Irigaray also recognise its creative possibilities. It is important to acknowledge with Irigaray that writing in itself may not necessarily result in substantial transformations in socio-political reality but it is possible to accept with Cixous that writing is a medium that can make an important contribution to change. Literature is one way in which women themselves can become involved in the creation and dissemination of their own alternative cultural stories – by writing and, importantly, by reading. Cixous’s thinking on writing is empowering, but the categorisations of *écriture féminine* and ‘women’s writing’ are somewhat limiting. Writing by women can certainly be usefully considered both inside and outside of such identities.

Kristeva’s *sujet en procès* read together with Cixous’s bisexuality allows for an understanding of both subjectivity and identity as dynamic and as a process. In these terms, reading would seem potentially to be an important site of dialogue. If contemporary writing by women is the locus of difference – of inscriptions of different representations, figurations, relations, ideas – then reading might be one passage towards change. Indeed, it is the potential of this particular passage that is explored in different ways in the chapters which follow since, although interaction between the text and the identity of the reader in the act of reading may be conceptually possible, the subjective nature of reading makes it certain that this interaction is no simple formulaic matter.

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1 See, for example, Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Grafton, 1990); Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1949; repr. 1976). In Britain, Virago have published work by rediscovered women writers of the past; in France, the publishers, des femmes, concentrate on modern writing by women of different nationalities. In different ways, both publishers reveal and promote a tradition of women’s writing.

2 This was the focus of early feminist literary criticism. See, for example, Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Hart-Davis, 1971), which set the tone for much that followed. It is important to recognise, however, that some writing by women (for example, popular romantic fiction) reproduces and reinforces traditional representations of women. See, for example, Ros Coward, “This Novel Changes Lives”:


4 In feminist terms, 'phallocentric', 'phallocratie' and 'patriarchal' are all commonly used to refer to the organisation of society and culture according to male-dominated perspectives. However, the term I use in this instance, 'phallogocentrism', given both its Lacanian and Derridian associations, is specifically relevant to language-based aspects of women's oppression. See Elizabeth Wright, ed., Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp.316-18. In general, I follow the terminology used by the critic or theorist under discussion.

5 See, for example, Jane Miller, Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture (London: Virago, 1990), p.164.

6 See Judith Still and Michael Worton, eds., Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993). In their introduction, the editors provide a useful elucidation of the different but inter-relating axes of both 'being a woman' and 'being a man'.


8 See, for example, Verena Andermatt Conley, Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine, expanded edition (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), and Morag Shiach, Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing (London: Routledge, 1991), for interpretations of this aspect of Cixous's work. These texts will be abbreviated as Writing in the Feminine and A Politics of Writing, respectively.


10 See Julia Kristeva, La Révolution du langage poétique: L'Avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle: Lautréamont et Mallarmé (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974). The parallels between Cixous's 'feminine' and Kristeva's 'semiotic' will be drawn out in the section on 'Identity' in this chapter.

11 Hélène Cixous, 'La Venue à l'écriture', in Entre l'écriture (Paris: des femmes, 1986), pp.7-69 (pp.64-65).

12 For a materialist critique of Cixous, see, for example, Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London: Routledge, 1991). See also Morag Shiach, "Their 'symbolic' exists; it holds power – we, the sowers of disorder, know it only too well!", in Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis, ed. Teresa Brennan (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.153-67, for a discussion of Cixous's relationship with psychoanalysis.

13 See also Hélène Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', in The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching, eds. Helen Wilcox and others (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp.5-30 (p.27).

14 In this connection, see Moira Gatens, Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p.115, for the important distinction between anatomy and morphology. Gatens values a women-centred morphology for its challenge to the Freudian construction of sexual difference where women are seen in terms of lack.


16 Annie Leclerc, Parole de femme (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1974). In Le Deuxième Sexe, Beauvoir suggests that the way women's biology has been represented in socio-cultural terms contributes to the way it is actually experienced. See also Germaine Greer, The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause (London: Penguin, 1992), for a similar point in relation to the menopause.

See, for example, Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, for a particularly uncritical stance; Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, for a highly critical approach. For a positive but critical study of Cixous’s work, see Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing*. See Judith Still, ‘A Feminine Economy: Some Preliminary Thoughts’, in *The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching*, pp.49-60 (p.58); see also Hélène Cixous, ‘Difficult Joys’, in the same volume, where Cixous seems to express her resistance to the responsibility of this over-investment (pp.28-29).

See, for example, Suzanne Lamy, *Quand je lis je m'invente* (Montreal: L'Hexagone, 1984). Lamy makes the case for thinking of women’s writing as a genre in terms of the value of collectivity and of the affirmation of identity: "le lieu d'où l'on parle compte souvent davantage dans nos sociétés que la parole elle-même" (p.100). See also Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora Press, 1987). Montefiore argues for a non-totalising literary separatism as a strategy in order to work towards the broadening of the literary canon.

See, for example, Michael Worton, 'Speaking the Language of Men', *Institute of Romance Studies Journal, 5* (1997), forthcoming.


See also Julia Kristeva, ‘Monstrueuse intimité (de la littérature comme expérience)’, *L’Infini, 48* (Winter 1994), pp.55-61 (p.55). See also Julia Kristeva, *Sens et non-sens de la révolte, pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse* I (Paris: Fayard, 1996), for a more sustained development of this point. This latter text is more fully referenced in Chapter 5.


37 Lynne Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading (London: Arnold, 1997), pp.242-43. An ‘implicated reading’ is a reading where the reader becomes involved emotionally with the text. This is not oppositional to a hermeneutic reading, however, since the two types of reading frequently co-exist in a relationship of tension.


39 For ‘praxis’, see Patrocinio P. Schweic^rt, ‘Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading’, in Readers and Reading, ed. Andrew Bennett (London: Longman, 1995), pp.66-93 (p.70); Judith Fetterley, The Resisting Reader, for ‘self-defence’(p.viii); Norman Holland, 5 Readers Reading, for ‘transaction’ (p.248); Emma Wilson, Sexuality and the Reading Encounter, for ‘encounter’; Lynne Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, for ‘romance’ (p.3); for ‘poaching’, see Michel de Certeau, ‘Reading as Poaching’, in Readers and Reading, pp.150-63; for ‘prospecting’, see Wolfgang Iser, Prospecting; for ‘maneuvering’, see Ross Chambers, Room for Maneuver, (p.18); and for ‘speculation’, see Michael Worton, ‘En lisant, en misant: Vers une nouvelle économie de la lecture’, L'Ecole des lettres (1997), forthcoming.

40 See, for example, Lynne Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, where Pearce employs the vocabulary of Roland Barthes’s A Lover’s Discourse to consider reading as romance. Both the trope and its vocabulary not only make visible but bring into existence the emotions she subsequently applies to and finds in reading (p.21).


45 Kristeva’s ‘semiotic’ (le sémiotique) is not to be confused with ‘semiotics’ (la sémiotique) – the study of signs – although her choice of this term thus willfully links her ‘semiotic’ with meaning.


52 Hélène Cixous, ‘Le Sexe ou la tête?’, Les Cahiers du GRIF, 13 (October 1976), pp.5-15 (p.15).


54 See Chapter 4, which specifically addresses these aspects in both Kristeva’s and Cixous’s work.

55 See Chapter 5, which engages precisely with this problematic of difference.


59 Luce Irigaray, 'Ecrire en tant que femme', in Je, tu, nous: Pour une culture de la différence (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1990), pp.63-73.
60 Luce Irigaray, Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), p.87. See also Luce Irigaray, Sexes et genres, and Speculum de l'autre femme (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974), for some accounts of women's subjectivity formation. In this connection, I generally follow Margaret Whitford's interpretation of Irigaray's work. See Margaret Whitford, Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine, in which Whitford considers Irigaray to be a post-Lacanian 'theorist of change' (pp.14-15).
63 See Luce Irigaray, 'A Propos de l'Ordre Maternel', in Je, tu, nous, pp.45-54.
64 Margaret Whitford, 'Luce Irigaray and the Female Imaginary: Speaking as a Woman', Radical Philosophy, 43 (Summer 1986), pp.3-8 (p.4).
67 See Elizabeth Grosz, Sexual Subversions, for this argument (pp.176-78,181-82). See also Luce Irigaray, J'aime à toi: Esquisse d'une félicité dans l'histoire (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1992).
TEXT/READER RELATIONS: INCLUSION/EXCLUSION, SEDUCTIONS AND THE POLITICS OF READING

The theories of reading and intertextuality discussed in the previous chapter suggest that reading is a dialogic relationship between the text and its reader(s). However, while dialogue is frequently conceptualised as a model of democracy and reciprocity, Lynne Pearce, in *Reading Dialogics*, also points out its political nature (p.201). Reading, in common with all dialogues, entails relations of power – in this context between the text and the reader. This does not necessarily imply that the text or the reader is in a constant hierarchical relationship of power over the other, but it does suggest that reading takes place within a framework of (changing) power relations. Although the relationship between text and reader would thus appear to be inherently unstable, it can perhaps be more positively described as dynamic. Different readers will read and interpret a text in different ways and a multiplicity of power relationships are possible between a particular text and its readers. The text may suggest, encourage, even direct the reader to a particular reading, but s/he may or may not (choose to) accept this. The individual reader thus has to negotiate his/her particular reading in dialogue with, in response to, and in interaction with, and against, the text.

My concern in this chapter is with textual strategies and effects and how they are involved in a political relationship with the reader, particularly in relation to sexual identity. A text may inscribe or suggest new or different ways of understanding (sexual) identity or relationships between people, but must ultimately rely on the reading process and its readership to interpret it and to make it mean.
This potential connection between reading and sexual identity suggests a figuring of the political relationship between the text and its reader(s) as seduction. Although the term 'seduction' does not necessarily carry explicitly sexual connotations (and indeed intellectual seduction is particularly pertinent to reading), reading is frequently figured in sexual and amorous terms. In *Seductions*, Jane Miller stresses that the complicity of the seducee is an essential aspect of seduction and that this is as relevant to textual as it is to sexual seductions (p.2). While seductions may be intended, conceived or perceived as generous, seduction can take place only within a framework of control determined by the seducer, for, as Miller maintains, 'a seduction which is resisted is bound to fail. Indeed, it at once ceases to be a seduction' (p.21). This point, however, needs to be taken further: whatever the intention or the outcome of the seduction, once the seducee moves beyond the control of the seducer, either by resisting, by misunderstanding, by demanding more or by taking control in other ways, the seduction is at an end. The relationship between the parties may not necessarily founder – indeed it may well develop productively – but it is no longer one of seduction.

The Latin origin of 'seduce' is 'se-ducere', to lead aside, and if texts are to change anything, they need first to seduce their readers. Textual strategies may therefore have the effect of including or excluding readers who must negotiate the dynamics of their own particular readings between complicity with the text and alienation from it, between seduction and resistance. Misreading is an ever-present possibility, and this can create anxiety or excitement. Above all, textual seduction, like other seductions, can be a productive and pleasurable encounter, and, after all, even if the seduction fails (perhaps particularly if it fails), both the seducee and seducer may learn something about
themselves and each other; the instances when the reader resists or takes control may
well be those which produce new and interesting readings of the text.

This chapter looks at ways in which text-reader power relations work, ways in
which a text seduces its readers or alienates them, how readers are positioned by or
position themselves in relation to a text. Nevertheless, seduction and alienation, or being
positioned and positioning oneself, are not necessarily strictly oppositional; they may be
alternative aspects of a reading but they do not exclude each other and may well be
experienced together. The consideration of text-reader relations which follows has no
pretensions to being an exhaustive survey of textual strategies or effects which operate on
the reader, even within the texts under consideration. It does, however, have a two-fold
purpose. My concern with the relationship between (sexual) identity and reading suggests
that reader identification is an important – although complex – area of investigation, and
both sections of this chapter address this from their different perspectives. In addition to
attempting to map out the politics of reading, the following discussion also considers the
unpredictability of reader identification. The first section, ‘Reading (about) Reading’,
considers some examples of fictional readers in the work of Baroche, Cixous and
Constant, and then, by means of a reconsideration of the same examples, goes on to
analyse the effects of reading (about) others reading; the final section, ‘Reading about
Writing’, concerns self-conscious texts, and considers the effects on the reader of both
textuality and intertextuality in the fiction of Baroche and Cixous.

**READING (ABOUT) READING**

One of the most readily identifiable aspects of the process of reading – of the
relations between the text and its readers – is that of identifications made with characters,
with narrators, even with authors themselves. Readers may identify with particular character traits, with situations, predicaments, or ideas. This is, however, a complex process. Different readers make different identifications at different times of reading depending on their own subjectivity and context of reading. It is therefore difficult — if not impossible — to pronounce on whether any specific reader or group of readers will identify with particular characters or ideas, particularly when, for instance, such a diverse group as that of 'women' is at stake.

Nevertheless, fictional examples of reading and interpretation occur in texts by all my chosen writers, and this section considers instances from Paule Constant’s *White Spirit*, Christiane Baroche’s *L’Hiver de beauté*, ‘Le Lézard d’or’ and *Les Ports du silence*, and Hélène Cixous’s *Illa*. These cases of fictional readers, which follow, illustrate some of the variation, complexity and unpredictability of reading identifications. In addition, these same examples provide the opportunity of considering the effects that the *mise en abyme* of reading about reading (and reading another reader’s reading) may have on the reader of fiction.

**Reading Identifications: Textual Readers**

**Example 1:**

In Constant’s *White Spirit*, which is set in post-colonial Africa, Lola, a French street prostitute of mixed race, reads an out-dated book written by Miss Priddy, an ex-Hollywood film make-up artist. In this instruction manual for women, ‘la bible de la réussite féminine’ (p. 100), Miss Priddy extols the image of the Hollywood film-star as an ideal and advises women how to achieve it through hard and continual work on their
appearance. Lola’s dream is to work in the Sunset Boulevard, a brothel based on an eclectic mix of 1950s Hollywood, the Barbie Doll, and a touch of romanticised French culture. However, Lola is rejected by Ysée, the French ex-actress who runs the brothel, for not meeting the required standards of ‘whiteness’, which in this context are defined as blondness, cleanliness, class and distinction.

In *White Spirit*, Miss Priddy’s book stresses the necessity of constant washing, grooming, bleaching, curling, brushing, shaving, manicuring and deodorising, as well as exercise ‘pour renforcer le buste, amincir la taille, aplatir le ventre, affiner les jambes, car tout le monde peut avoir les jambes de Marlène’ (p.101). Lola is in turn seduced by Miss Priddy’s promises and confidences, for example that ‘Marilyn non plus n’était pas blonde’ (p.101), and humiliated by her disgust of women’s, especially French women’s – and consequently Lola’s own – natural uncleanliness. Nevertheless, Miss Priddy assures her readers that it is possible to *become* blonde; after all ‘Marilyn mettait deux heures à devenir chaque matin Marilyn’ (p.103). In this (fictional) text, Marlène Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe are the ideals to which every woman should aspire, and Miss Priddy, confirming her authority by using the stars’ first names, shares with her readers the confidence that even the most successful among them had to work at their appearance.

According to Lola’s interpretation of Miss Priddy’s book, her own brown skin and Afro hair are an enormous handicap; such is her desire to be accepted at the Sunset Boulevard that her reading has direct and extreme consequences on her life. Following her reading, Lola is ready to do whatever is required, to spend as much time as is necessary, to bleach everything that it is possible to bleach in order to take the route towards becoming clean, blonde, white – and thus desirable. From the village shop, she buys some white powder (the ‘white spirit’ of the title) which seems to be just what she is
looking for because of the effect it has on the skin of the African workers who handle it. Deformed from accidents caused by bad safety regulations on the local banana plantation and from the effects of insecticide spraying, they have already suffered so much that the damage to their skin caused by handling this caustic substance (dumped onto the African market by Western entrepreneurs) is not experienced as especially painful. The top layers of skin on their hands and arms are effectively burnt off, and in this way, black skin becomes the desired white!

Lola subsequently bleaches her skin and hair with this substance, but before she does irreparable damage, she is rescued and taken in hand by Ysée. In the last chapter of *White Spirit*, entitled ‘Happy End’, Lola’s dream comes true: she becomes Belle-Beauty at the Sunset Boulevard, and she is even chosen as ‘the white one’ by Victor, a young Frenchman whom Lola in turn desires for his blondness and whiteness. Ultimately, just as she wishes, she too becomes desirable and desired for her whiteness.

In *White Spirit*, Lola finds what she wants in her reading. She readily accepts Miss Priddy’s advice and acts on it because the values promoted echo those required to meet the standards of the Sunset Boulevard. In her reading, Lola is positioned by Miss Priddy’s text – seduced and humiliated in turn. The extreme nature of her response, however, is a subjective one. On the one hand, the text offers her what she wants to read since its values and its instructions coincide with her own fantasies and desire to become blonde and white. On the other hand, Miss Priddy’s disgust of uncleanliness reawakens Lola’s early memories of her foster mother, who, exasperated by Lola’s clumsiness and disorder, gave her the nickname, Princesse Caca. In succumbing to the values which both Miss Priddy and Ysée promote, Lola may indeed be a victim of a web of systems of oppression – hetero-patriarchy, racism, colonialism, capitalism – but her obsession with
whiteness can also be understood in a different way: the idea that she might be dirty, or
even seem dirty, reawakens her childhood shame.

In *White Spirit*, Lola is a woman who is seduced by idealised images of women.
Her reading makes connections with her aspirations and with childhood memories,
providing her with the vision that she can become blonde and white. In her terms indeed
she can and does. In doing so, she may become and remain a victim of a network of
oppressions, but she does achieve what she wants and constructs an identity for herself
within those systems.

*Example 2:*

In Christiane Baroche’s *L’Hiver de beauté*, the twentieth-century Queria is
studying the life of her eighteenth-century ancestor, Isabelle, reading letters, diaries and
other accounts of her life in order to write her own (fictional) version. Isabelle is
Baroche’s re-creation of the character, Mme. de Merteuil, from Laclos’s *Les Liaisons
dangereuses*. In the last letter of Laclos’s novel, she is left ill and disfigured from
smallpox, having lost an eye, and ruined financially and socially, and this is her situation
at the beginning of *L’Hiver de beauté*. Queria is drawn to write about Isabelle because of
their similar disfigurement, although her circumstances are different: Queria was born
one-eyed, disfigured by forceps at birth. Nevertheless, the differences between the two
women seemingly outweigh their similarities. Culturally, socially and historically, their
lives are very different: in the eighteenth century, women’s beauty was a passport to their
success, but although Queria is ugly, as a twentieth-century woman, she is well educated
and is able to earn her own living.
At first, Queria throws herself into her research in order to escape her own reality, but gradually her reading of and about Isabelle helps her to think about her own life. The experiences she shares with Isabelle in relation to her disfigurement make her aware that, despite the diversity between women, there are universal aspects to be found in women’s experiences of beauty, ugliness and sexuality. Across cultures and historical periods, women’s desirability is linked to youth and beauty, but in *L’Hiver de beauté*, Queria goes further than this, making connections between the ugliness that she and Isabelle share and that which comes with the ageing that all women in specular (and patriarchal) societies have to bear: ‘Horriblement, je rêve à l’hiver de toutes les femmes, et pas seulement au sien, il n’est pas besoin de variole pour ça, l’âge suffit.’ (p. 16). The sexuality and desirability of ugly – or old – women is judged differently from that of young and/or beautiful women – or indeed to that of men. Despite historical and cultural differences, Queria finds that it is possible to make meaningful connections between Isabelle’s situation, issues which are relevant to women generally, and her own circumstances.

Queria’s reading is involved in the choices she subsequently makes in her life and in the way she perceives and identifies herself. She follows Isabelle’s example but she has to make her own decisions. The choices and opportunities open to her in the twentieth century are different from those Isabelle has in the eighteenth century. As a concession to the sensibilities of others, Isabelle covers her empty eye socket with a velvet patch; Queria makes a similar concession but her solution is different. She decides to have reconstructive surgery on her face (a choice that Isabelle would not have had). This is, however, no capitulation to the pressures of patriarchy; rather, it is an individual negotiation which allows her to live her future differently. Queria wants to be loved for
what she is and, importantly, as she is. Following Isabelle’s example, she is thus able to make herself easier to look at without compromising her self-respect since she refuses all pressure to have a glass eye.

In L'Hiver de beauté, Queria is an active reader, interpreting the texts she reads. She deciphers the fear of Chaumont, the notaire, not from what he writes in his letters, but from his ‘écriture rapide, hachée [...] comme une respiration qui se perd’ (p.22), and she recognises Isabelle’s pain from the way her pen tears the paper after Armand-Marie (the man she loves) encounters her ruined face for the first time (p.67). Queria can read sceptically, recognising, for example, that Chaumont’s reversion to polite forms of address in his letters are a cover for his manipulations (p.27), but she is seduced by Isabelle’s diary, never appearing to doubt its honesty. Diaries are indeed generally more honest documents than letters as they are rarely written for a reader whom the author may want to impress or manipulate, although in Seductions, Miller’s quotation from Clara Collet’s diary suggests otherwise: ‘The most difficult thing in a diary is to write totally for yourself, try as hard as one will there is always the arrière-pensée about what people would think if they read it’ (p.81). Moreover, pertinently, in Baroche’s subsequent novel, Les Ports du silence, her character, Jaime, does question the truth of his aunt Adeline’s diary: surprised by the disclosures of her sexual activity, he initially wonders if she was writing about her fantasies rather than reality (p.44). However, in L'Hiver de beauté, Queria’s reading is clearly subjective: ‘L’on s’enfonce dans une “terre inconnue” dont au fond de soi, on connaît le pouvoir monadique et dont on suppose, ou espère (et même que l’on contraint à) la similitude avec ses propres territoires’ (p.109). In common with other biographers, she is looking for similarities between her own situation and that of her subject, Isabelle, and the latter offers her a fascinating and empowering reflection.
In *L'Hiver de beauté*, the relations between Queria and Isabelle are, however, more complex than a simple identificatory reading would imply since the Isabelle with whom Queria identifies in her reading is also the Isabelle she *creates* for the book she is writing. In *L'Hiver de beauté*, the first episode that Queria begins to fictionalise is the account of Isabelle’s rape by her step-son, Hector, and it reveals Queria’s need to find inspiration in her ancestor. Most unusually, although Isabelle is hurt both physically and psychologically, in Queria’s account she emerges triumphant from this traumatic event. Queria has little to go on, since there is only a limited amount of commentary about the incident in Isabelle’s diary, and what commentary there is is rather ambiguous: “‘Je n’ai pas appelé, je n’ai pas eu peur, je n’ai pas fait un mouvement pour l’arrêter, au contraire. Je pensais sans cesse, tu vas te souvenir de ça toute ta vie, mon garçon!’” (pp.45-46). Isabelle states that she does not resist Hector. She does not stop him – ‘au contraire’. This declaration in itself is, however, highly ambiguous: it could mean that Isabelle is passive and lets Hector do as he wants, or it could mean that Isabelle is active and encourages Hector. Ambiguous too is Isabelle’s subsequent statement in her diary that: “‘[Hector] a de son père et de ses pratiques une connaissance sûre, il a des références, je les lui ai données’” (p.46). From Isabelle, Hector learns of his father’s sexual practices and discovers the nature of his own sexual desires, which, Isabelle’s diary suggests, include sodomy: “‘ce taurillon chavire des génisses de bocage, ou leurs vachers, si j’en crois ses préférences’” (p.46). However, Isabelle’s admission, ‘je les lui ai données’, still does not provide clarification of the nature of her response to Hector’s attack since it could be interpreted either as action on Isabelle’s part or as a figurative (passive) giving.
In *L'Hiver de beauté*, Queria’s narration emphasises the triumphant outcome of this episode for Isabelle. Well before the account of the rape, there are repeated allusions to the confrontation to come:

Seulement, ressortirez-vous entier de cet affrontement? (Chaumont to Hector, p.24)

Hector s'engouffra (c'est peu de le dire!) dans cette souille chaude, croyant à l'hallali, et Isabelle le servit d'un unique coup. (p.28)

Isabelle en parle, on le verra, avec l'ironie d'une Palatine revenue des étreintes de Monsieur. (p.38)

Quand il ressort, il sait pour quels abîmes il est construit et il a perdu Vairville, définitivement. (p.38)

A mon sens, elle ne commence à réfléchir d'une façon vraiment moderne (c'est-à-dire la nôtre) – à se pencher sur la place des femmes dans sa société – qu'après la visite d'Hector. (p.41)

Hector’s defeat at the hands of Isabelle is prefigured in these allusions. Moreover, the situation (that Queria creates) leading to the rape absolves Isabelle of any provocation in the assault. Queria suggests that Isabelle’s face affects Hector as if it were a weapon against which he has no defence (p.43) but that she does not provoke him either sexually, verbally, or physically (p.45). Hector leaves still desiring Isabelle, but compromised and shocked by what he discovers about his own sexuality. Ironically, it is implied that, in this confrontation with Isabelle, Hector is forced to recognise his homosexual desires; he is shocked by this discovery because he so wholeheartedly performs the identity of a stereotypical macho, misogynist, swashbuckling, heterosexual man.

In Queria’s version of the events, Hector comes to see Isabelle in order to obtain from her the rights to Vairville, the only property left to her, but which he insists is part of his own inheritance. Faced with Isabelle’s quiet but dogmatic refusal, Hector, overcome by anger, frustration and desire, attacks and rapes her. In her narrative, Queria
admits that she invents these details of the situation leading to the rape in order to make what follows more understandable, because otherwise it would not have ‘le même sens’ (pp.42-43). The account Queria gives is therefore a reconstruction, her own interpretation, a fictional version; indeed in her diary, Isabelle herself never uses the word ‘rape’ (viol). Queria’s declared interpretive fictionalisation of the rape episode is interesting, because it suggests that she creates a situation which confirms the meaning of Isabelle’s words as she interprets them or rather, as she wishes to interpret them.

In *L’Hiver de beauté*, Queria is fascinated by Isabelle’s seeming modernity and makes connections between contemporary feminist issues and, for example, Isabelle’s unabashed frequentation of bars in the port (p.65). Contemporary radical feminism politicises rape as a symbol of male-female power relations in society, working to counter popular (and legal) conceptions of the raped woman as the guilty victim, and against the idea that women – often simply by being women – provoke (or tacitly consent to) rape. In these terms, Queria’s fictionalisation (creation) of the rape episode confirms the meaning she wants to read, indeed that she needs to read, personally and as a twentieth-century woman in the light of Isabelle’s (ambiguous) comments in her diary. Queria’s version of the event confirms Isabelle as the winner of the confrontation, but it also goes further and inscribes her as the innocent victim. In *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller comments:

> It is no wonder, then, that most women confronted by physical aggression fall apart at the seams, and suffer a paralysis of will. We have been trained to cry, to wheedle, to plead, to look for a male protector, but we have never been trained to fight and win. (p.402)

Queria’s interpretation (or creation) of the rape episode reveals an Isabelle who, faced with the fact that her ugliness is after all no protection, makes use of the weapons she has at her disposal – her sexuality and her spirit – to fight back and win against Hector’s
attack on her. Rape is humiliating and degrading to the victim but Isabelle succeeds in
turning the tables on Hector. In this way, Queria creates in Isabelle an empowering
eample and role model for the modern woman that she is.9

In *L'Hiver de beauté*, Queria’s reading (and writing) of Isabelle’s life has a
transformative impact on her own life and on her very identity. From *Ninguém* (in
Brazilian Portuguese ‘no one’) as Queria first identifies herself (p.155), from hiding her
face behind her hair, and from burying herself in libraries, she becomes ‘la sirène borgne’
(p.269), an identity which she shares with Isabelle, and which asserts the women’s
physical disability as much as the mythical dimension of their seductiveness. At the end
of *L'Hiver de beauté*, Queria, finishing her book, is able to leave Isabelle behind and
embark on a new life, a new career and a new love affair.

In *L'Hiver de beauté*, Queria is seduced by – and also creates – a fascinating and
empowering Isabelle. The connections between her identification with Isabelle and
women’s experiences in more general terms suggest that, in this case and to a certain
extent, Queria reads ‘as a woman’.10 However, in reading identifications, gender is no
simple or straightforward matter, and it would be unwise to draw any generalised
conclusions from such a particularly transformative reading as Queria’s. In this
connection, Baroche’s short story, ‘Le Lézard d’or’, offers an interesting example of a
woman’s identification with a male character. This text relates to film rather than reading,
but perhaps this factor serves to reinforce the contrast rather than to negate the
comparison since the audiovisual nature of the filmic text furnishes an added dimension
to its overall effect; visual representation reinforces the maleness of the character – the
viewer is constantly confronted with a male figure.
In ‘Le Lézard d’or’, the character, Benoîte, identifies with the figure of Don Giovanni, as he is represented in Joseph Losey’s 1979 film of Mozart’s opera, Don Giovanni. This example is particularly interesting in the context of reading and gender because here a modern woman identifies with a male character not only from a contemporary film but from classical literature and opera. Furthermore, Don Giovanni has acquired mythical status for his seduction and abandonment of women, and is deeply implicated in stereotypes of masculinity and masculine sexuality. In fact, Benoîte’s identification with Don Giovanni has nothing to do with either his gender or his sexuality but relates to his dilemma at the end of the film – or at least to her own interpretation of Losey’s portrayal. In ‘Le Lézard d’or’, Benoîte considers that the enigmatic young valet in black, introduced into the opera by Losey, is ‘l’éternel témoin’, Don Giovanni’s conscience and the child within who has been compromised by his adult life (p.78). A complex – and indeed ironic – interaction of elements from the film and her life lead her to confront the very fact of her own identity: she has to decide whether to continue to compromise her needs in a boring job and stagnant relationship, or whether to make a break with her past and take a risk. Thus Benoîte too is faced with her own ‘petite servante vêtue de ténèbres’ (p.78), her own conscience and, in her case, her need to paint. In ‘Le Lézard d’or’, Benoîte subsequently makes important changes in her life, including the basis on which her sexual and emotional relationships with men are established, but her interaction with Don Giovanni is not one based on gender.

Example 3:

In Baroche’s Les Ports du silence, the principal character, Jaime, reads a great deal and constantly makes connections between his reading and his life. For example, using
literary references, 'cette femme était à la fois “fille de Prince” et bâtarde, perpétuellement entre la Marquise de Théus et Tess d'Urbeville, entre Hyacinthe et ...' (p.100), he tries in vain to describe the character, Elodie. Because of his love of reading, Jaime is considered by other characters to be a romantic and a dreamer, and it is feared that this precludes him from dealing with reality. However, for Jaime, reading and reality are not mutually exclusive: 'au bout du compte, vivre nourrit le livre qui nourrit la vie' (PS, p.227). Reading and life interact, interrelate and enrich each other.

Indeed, in Les Ports du silence, Jaime's reading plays a fundamental role in his own self-knowledge. At the age of fourteen, he reads Giono's Un Roi sans divertissement, 'un bréviaire du désespoir' (p.159), which has a deep and troubling effect on him. At the time, he does not understand why this book affects him so profoundly, but on his return to Mérindole as an adult he re-reads it. This time, however, he is able to understand why the book had such a deep effect on him as an adolescent. Giono's Un Roi sans divertissement, borrowing the Pascalian concept of divertissement, reveals the void at the heart of existence: in the absence of God, all activity (for example, work, daily tasks, leisure pursuits) diverts attention from the reality of the human condition. Activity is a relief from monotony and it fills the void. The implication of this is that life is nothing but time spent waiting to die; living is simply a (Pascalian) divertissement. In Un Roi sans divertissement, the character, Langlois, chooses suicide because he recognises his own fascination with death and because he realises that the potential of murder is within everyone. Murder, like any other act, can be a divertissement.

Such a philosophy of existence would be bound to have an enormous impact on the fourteen-year old Jaime, a half-Jewish orphan, in the context of his reading at the end of the Second World War. His parents were killed in the Nazi death camps, and for him to
place that tragedy in terms of Giono’s statement in *Un Roi sans divertissement* that ‘la vérité ... est vraie pour tout le monde’ (p.96), would be disturbing indeed. If the truth is that murder is a *divertissement*, and if that is true for everyone, then it must be true for him too. Furthermore, this is precisely the sentence which he finds underlined after Adeline has read and returned the book to him, and thus it would seem that the young Jaime interprets this as a specific message to him from his aunt.

In *Les Ports du silence*, as an adult, Jaime finds re-reading Giono’s book a painful experience: ‘Ah, c’est l’enfer. Les textes sur lesquels on s’est aveuglé ne sont qu’un divertissement qui masquait l’essentiel, un écho de nos voix les plus secrètes. Oui, ces textes vous rattrapent et vous tuent. Là est leur royauté’ (p.151). In his reading, he discovers how texts can reveal the void at the heart of existence, but, paradoxically, that reading them can also hide this void. Indeed, reading has been his own *divertissement*.

However, at this point, Jaime also reads his aunt Adeline’s diary from the period. From this, he learns that she was concerned about his reading of this text, and that, when she read the book, she in fact returned it to him without note or comment. Moreover, he learns that she subsequently encouraged him into his career in construction as a result of his troubled reaction to Giono’s book, considering that work of this nature would anchor him in reality (pp.157-61). In *Les Ports du silence*, Jaime comes to realise that ‘il n’y a de réponse à rien. On meurt sans savoir d’où l’on vient et où l’on va’ (p.191). He understands that he will never find the answer to the meaning of life even if one exists; we can never know the reason for existence.

Subsequently, Jaime is able to find a way of understanding himself and his relations with others. He is after all ‘un Juif errant’ (p.191), needing to travel, to construct and move on, to get away from ‘[les] attentions des proches’, from others’ appropriations
of him, from how others see (or want) him to be (p.169). When he visits the Colineau’s house, he understands that having children (as they have), or growing orchids (as he does), is perhaps also just a divertissement, a way of filling time, a way of living while waiting for death, but, importantly, he also realises that this is life itself (p.178). He is thus able to explain his love for Elodie in new terms. Elodie is ‘vivante’ but she is also a ‘tueuse’, the murderer of the dying José. It is not fascination with death which attracts him to her; Jaime recognises that it is the life in her he loves. Through Elodie, Jaime can understand that murder is not just a divertissement. José is ill and wants to die; the murder Elodie commits is an act of love. In Les Ports du silence, eventually Jaime and ‘ses deux femmes’ (p.267), Elodie and Flore, find a way of living (separately) which accommodates the relationships they have with each other. The love, affection, happiness and parenting that they share does not involve marriage, cohabitation or appropriative and exclusive relationships.

In Les Ports du silence, reading plays a fundamental part in Jaime’s life. It gives him much pleasure but it also leads him to speculate on the philosophical question of existence. Moreover, the interchange between reading and reality which he recognises, enables him to find a way of understanding and reconciling life and his own needs.

**Example 4:**

This final example of a textual reader reading is somewhat different. In Cixous’s work, ‘the reader’ crosses text and genre. It would be misleading to refer to this ‘reader’ as a character, although it is possible to refer to her as a woman. Cixous’s reading subject usually appears in the first person singular and is always feminine, although in her texts *je* is never stable, is always multiple; for Cixous ‘a subject is at least a thousand
people'. In the fictional text, *Ilia*, for example, the reading-writing subject is *je*, but also *nous*, we (women); *nous*, we-(women)-who-write; and *nous* because of ‘la chaîne de femmes’ who nourish she-who-writes (p. 68); *la troisième*, the *Ilia* of the title, the third person (singular) who is the woman-who-writes-within-*je* (p. 131); the *toi* who receives and is born out of, Lispector’s writing (p. 179); and even *personne*, anyone, no one (p. 97). In Latin, *illa* is the feminine demonstrative personal pronoun: ‘she’ or ‘that (feminine) one there’. The personal pronoun is rarely used with the verb in Latin, the verb conveying the ‘person’ but not the gender of the subject which can only be recognised in context. Given the dominance of the masculine in socio-cultural and linguistic terms, the feminine is thus effectively rendered absent from language, unless *illa* is used to give added emphasis. In *Ilia*, *je* is in search of *la troisième* (*Ilia*, the writing self within) who for the moment cannot express herself: ‘Pas de pronom personnel, pas de sujet pour le moment, pas qui se sache. Sujet en attente, au secret. Lutte contre un mutisme’ (p. 57). As an (absent) personal pronoun, *Ilia* is the figuration of the woman within who can become (come into being) by expressing herself... in writing – for Latin is now primarily a written language.

In *Ilia*, women’s identity is presented as a feminine trinity, echoing (and therefore challenging) the authority of the Christian one: ‘(...)Et si {elle} est une femme, alors elle est une {elle} d’au moins trois elles’ (p. 10). This trinity principally comprises the daughter, the (absent) mother and the writing self (*la troisième*, *Ilia*), but it is a fluid concept and other figures of three can be mapped onto it.

In both Cixous’s *Vivre l’Orange* and *Ilia*, the reading subject (who is also the narrative *je* and the writing subject) celebrates Clarice Lispector’s writing. In *Ilia*, the narrator (*je*) describes the impact of Lispector’s work with images of extreme thirst:
Ainsi la voix-Clarice. Elle donne un boire à Illa, la troisième, depuis des mois. [...] Je me suis trouvée chez elle en octobre désert, l’écriture rétrécie [...] l’écriture avait tout perdu, sauf la soif, un besoin cruel de ne pas mourir. Elle lui a rendu l’orange. Ce que dit l’orange à l’appel de sa voix: son jus de lune, elle l’a bu en plein désert. (p.131)

The discovery of Lispector’s writing (‘la voix-Clarice’) saves her own writing self (Illa). Rescuing her from isolation and aridity, Lispector’s work quenches her thirst and nourishes her. This impact is confirmed in other terms throughout the text: from ‘la désespoir’ and ‘une nuit froide et sèche’ (p.89), from ‘la mort’ and still-born writing (‘l’écriture ne bougeait presque plus [...] mon ventre devenu muet’ [p.90]), Lispector’s work holds out a hand to her (p.97), and brings her the nourishment of ‘les fruits’ (p.95).

In *Ilia*, *je* is struck by the way Lispector approaches her subjects and the way she describes things (*les choses*), like an egg, for example, ‘dans toute son étrangeté’: ‘elle le ramène de trop près’ (p.152). Eggs, and even roses, are so much part of daily life that we no longer look at them in their specificity. *Je* values the way Lispector sees things. In opening up to them, she opens them up to her readers: ‘Elle fait qu’elles soient là, devant nous, et nous vérifions au même instant, comme elles existent, comme elles sont devenues là, et comme dorénavant elles sont encore là’ (p.152). In Lispector’s short story, ‘L’OEuf et la poule’, for example, her narrator (*je*) meditates on the impossibility of really seeing, describing or thinking about an egg, for, even as we try to do so, it loses its essence. Yet, paradoxically, by means of her very meditation, she brings an egg into being in her text in a way which allows her readers to see it in its complexity.19

In the parallel texts of *Vivre l’Orange/To Live the Orange*, Lispector’s approach is celebrated as ‘la manière-femme de travailler’ (p.107), ‘the womanly-way of working’ (p.106). In *Ilia*, *je* describes reading Lispector as ‘une rencontre’ (p.91), ‘un cadeau’ (p.179), as love, friendship (p.96) and in bodily terms as ‘caresser’ (p.99), ‘toucher’
(p.100). She lets herself be seduced (p.92), identifying with Lispector, not only for her approach but also, most importantly, as a woman writing. In *Vivre l’Orange*, a telephone call reminds the writing subject not to forget the importance of real women’s lives (pp.23/25), and in *Ilia* the political is as important as the poetical. In this latter text, in addition to valuing the discovery of Lispector’s work, *je* emphasises the importance of the support and nourishment of other women both in culture and history *and* in the real contemporary world. In *Ilia*, the political dimension (feminism) is represented by Angela, *je*’s friend, ‘qui existe en réalité’ (p.95), but whose identity is unfixed. In *Ilia*, the figure of Angela is at once an individual person, a symbol of feminist activism and a representative of the collectivity (feminism). In this way, she can also be Antonia (who is thus ‘an Angela’ — a feminist) and ‘ange est là’ (p.129). As far as the reader is concerned, this ambiguity also allows for the possibility of mapping onto the figure of Angela specific (real) feminist women, such as, for example, Angela Davis (the black American feminist activist), Antoinette Fouque (the *directrice* of the women’s publishers, des femmes). In *Ilia*, the conjunction of Lispector’s work with feminism ‘l’accord clarice-angela’ (p.184) is particularly productive. Lispector is concerned with things, Angela with women; Lispector’s approach is valuable for women, who, like flowers (or eggs), are just there ‘elles sont tellement là’, unrecognised in their specificity (p.157). Reading Lispector teaches *Ilia*, the writing self, how to read, how to see others, and enables her — finally — to write: the last sentence of *Ilia* is ‘je suis prête’ (p.212).

In this highly woman-centred example, reading has a fundamental impact on the reading subject as a woman. It rescues, nourishes and inspires her writing self and enables her to come into being as a writing subject. In *Ilia*, the letter *je* wants to write to Lispector (but cannot since Lispector is dead) becomes the text:
It thus becomes this text, *Illa*, which she writes with, from and towards (other) women.

In these examples reading has a powerful impact on the reading subject. In all cases, reading identifications play some part in transforming the subject’s life and identity. The gender of Lola, Queria and that of Cixous’s reading subject certainly comes into play in this transformative process and to some extent (although not necessarily consciously) they all read *as women*. However, gender does not have the same place in the identifications made by Benoîte or Jaime. They both subsequently change the way they live their lives and their relationships but neither Jaime’s reading nor Benoîte’s interpretation is a directly gendered one.

These readings within texts offer the opportunity of exploring the effects on text/reader relations of the *mise en abyme* of reading about reading – and of reading about readers reading. As the examples under consideration show, identification in reading is a complex matter, and it would be misguided to suggest that in turn the reader of the fiction text automatically identifies with the fictional reader even if s/he considers him/her an alter ego.

In the following reconsideration of these examples of reading (about) reading, particular attention is paid to narrative positions and positioning, characterisation and context from the perspective of Constant’s, Baroche’s and Cixous’s readers, in order to suggest ways in which text/reader relations operate.
**Text/Reader Relations**

**Example 1:**

For Constant's contemporary, post-colonial, post-feminist, French (for the most part) readership, Lola in *White Spirit* is clearly a victim of oppression. For readers who recognise the historical and cultural context of Miss Priddy's book and relate it to the power systems and ideology within which it is placed, Lola as a character elicits both sympathy and (momentary) superiority (we would not read Miss Priddy's text in the same way).

*White Spirit* is narrated in the third person past historic tense and thus the diegesis is retrospective. Moreover, the characters' thoughts, dialogue and reactions are always mediated by the narration. Indeed, the sarcastic tone with which Miss Priddy's instructions are described directs Constant's readers' own reactions. Miss Priddy's values are justified in the name of the dignity of women and of a human respect endemic to America, and she rages against women for their lack of cleanliness – especially French women who are particularly unpleasant. The narration explicitly states the implications of her idealisation of blondness: if you become blonde, you will not be as disgusting as a French woman, and you will certainly not be mistaken for one as they are all dark-haired! Having thus constructed a reading which leads to a rejection of Miss Priddy's values (particularly by Constant's primarily French readership), the narration turns to describe Lola hacking at her hair with a pair of scissors, reasoning that her own Afro hair, which she likens to that of wild animals, must indeed be the most disgusting of all as Miss Priddy hasn't even mentioned it: 'les femmes, même les Françaises, n'avaient pas ça sur
la tête’ (p. 102). By this reiteration of Miss Priddy’s disgust of French women, even though she herself is French, Lola is shown completely and naïvely to accept her values. The reader, who has already rejected those values, may momentarily feel superior but the narration immediately proceeds to elicit the reader’s sympathy. Lola’s now short hair gives her ‘au bout d’un cou très long une tête toute petite, une tête de femme tondue, une tête d’enfant malade, une tête de jeune soldat’ (p. 102). The reader is confronted with images of Lola’s vulnerability.

The ‘White Spirit’ that Lola buys, which is also the title of Constant’s novel, has particular resonances for French readers. The product ‘white spirit’ in French is ‘le white-spirit’. However, in the text and in the title, ‘White Spirit’ is always spelled the English way – without a hyphen. This spelling therefore emphasises the foreignness of the term to French readers, who, while connecting it to the household product, are forced to recognise it specifically as a foreign word with other possible connotations. In the context of Constant’s novel, the foreign name of the product (and the title) draws attention in particular to the linguistic and cultural ‘imperialism’ of Anglo-American vocabulary on the French language, which is further reinforced by chapters entitled ‘Le garden-party’, ‘Happy End’, ‘Go home’ and indeed the encapsulation of whiteness, the brothel, the Sunset Boulevard.

The narration elicits both the reader’s superiority and sympathy to Lola’s obsession with whiteness, but it also goes further. While undoubtedly commenting on the Anglicisation of the French language, the many anglicisms of the text draw French readers’ attention to their own complicity with their common usage; many anglicisms are now part of the French language. This emphasis would seem to direct the readers’ response to their own relationship (and possible complicity) with such cultural
imperialism, and thus in the post-colonial context of the novel and of its reading, to colonialism and to the whiteness which is valued in the text.23

Reading (about) Lola’s reading encourages Constant’s readers to call into question their own reading position. If they do not wish to identify themselves with Lola as a (passive) reader who follows the reading constructed by the text she is reading, they in turn must try to resist the reading constructed by Constant’s text. On the back cover, *White Spirit* is described as both a fable and a novel. Such descriptions are primarily promotional as well as informative but, to a great extent, they also direct the reader’s approach to the text. The novel, *White Spirit*, has qualities which could also be said to characterise the fable, such as the humanisation of animals, its narrative structure, a moral dimension, the characters’ lack of depth and their surreal, innocent and childlike qualities. However, these latter qualities also play into traditional (and colonial) stereotypes of primitiveness and portrayals of otherness and difference. The reader of *White Spirit* is therefore confronted with a dilemma. If s/he simply follows the dominant reading constructed by the text, s/he is effectively as naïve a reader as Lola. If, on the other hand, s/he resists the fabular reading which is prefigured on the back cover, s/he thus risks associating the novel’s characterisations with racist stereotypes. In a different connection, but one which would seem to be pertinent to the reading of Constant’s *White Spirit*, Michel Tournier has stressed that, not only do readers have freedom but also they have responsibility for the text they are effectively co-creating.24 In this case, if the text and its “literary techniques of “othering””25 could be considered as being implicated in a form of post-colonial colonialism, so too therefore would be the reader, its co-creator.26

Although, to a great extent, Lola reads and is oppressed as a woman, *White Spirit* is not a woman-centred text. Lola’s reading is just one aspect (although it is a typifying one)
of this novel which problematises categories of difference and oppression on a larger scale. In *White Spirit*, whiteness is desirable difference as well as oppression. Moreover, any potential breakdown or threat to the systems of oppression which occurs in the course of the novel is resolved, leaving them all firmly in place at the end. In the final chapter, however, the celebration of this return to categorisation ultimately excludes the reader by means of its over-determination: for example, Lola, neither black nor white, is ultimately chosen as the 'white one', but not before she has shaved her pubic hair and even sellotaped the lips of her vagina together in order to hide 'ces replis rose et gris' which detract from the whiteness of her bleached skin (p.207). At the end of *White Spirit*, Constant’s readers are left with the sympathies elicited during the course of the novel but, more importantly, they are left to interrogate their own attitudes in relation to colonialism, post-colonialism, cultural imperialism, whiteness.

**Example 2:**

In *L'Hiver de beauté* the doubling effect of the *mise en abyme* of reading (about) Queria reading is reinforced and intensified still further by the ‘Postface’ to the folio edition, where Baroche stresses the importance of her own reading in the creation of this novel. In this ‘Postface’, Baroche describes her anger at the fate Laclos dealt his Mme. de Merteuil in the last letter of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*: ‘Trop, c’est trop’ (p.322), and she reveals the emotion with which she wrote *L'Hiver de beauté*, recreating Laclos’s character as Isabelle. This authorial address can, however, be perceived as both generous and controlling. To inform the reader of the genesis of her novel enriches the reading of it. Nonetheless, to some extent this ‘Postface’ controls how the reader should read not only *L'Hiver de beauté* but also *Les Liaisons dangereuses*: 
Or, pour les femmes du XXe que nous sommes, libérées si nous le souhaitons, de la nécessité conjugale par un moyen on ne peut plus honorable appelé l’indépendance financière – mais qui n’est pas comme on dit, “donné”! –, pour nous, cet être sans passé (Les Liaisons disent bien peu sur elle avant les temps considérés) comme sans avenir, isolé entre deux néants pour quelques semaines de lumière noire, oui, cette créature glacée, cérébrale jusque dans l’indécence, est fichtrement séduisante. (*L’Hiver*, pp.322-23)

Including her female readers specifically in this *nous*, Baroche encourages them to share her viewpoint. Nonetheless, Baroche would appear to be more generous than Laclos, whose Preface to *Les Liaisons dangereuses* attempts to determine readings of his novel in advance by stressing its moral value (*Les Liaisons*, p.29). Baroche’s ‘Postface’, placed after the text, can more readily be conceived as an explanation and an enhancement. This further level of doubling, stressing the power of Baroche’s own reading experience, emphasises the importance that reading has in the text as a whole.

In spite of the typographical delineation which differentiates and distinguishes the various narratives in *L’Hiver de beauté*, the different perspectives at first remain uncertain: at different times both Isabelle and Queria are *je* and *elle*. Eighteenth-century narratives, twentieth-century narratives, reconstructions and fictionalisations alternate and interweave in a complex way. Queria’s narration of her own life is combined first with the narration of her own reading and writing and then with the writing of Isabelle’s life, as well as with her comments on the process of writing. The uncertain fluid tone set by the narration is echoed in the novel’s proliferating images of mists, flickering candlelight, dimly-lit rooms, water. However, although this may have the effect of unsettling the readers, Queria’s narrative style draws them in, including them implicitly with the use of the first person plural ‘de nos jours’ (p.38), ‘une façon vraiment moderne (c’est-à-dire la nôtre)” (p.41), and by means of chatty and jokey comments on her reading:
On s’écrivait beaucoup à l’époque, et dans une mesure assez malicieuse, il est difficile de savoir, rien que par l’usage de ce verbe, si l’on s’écrivait, si l’on se décrivait. (p.15)

Hector est un cupidon gras dont la chevelure ne doit rien aux perruques du temps. Il est blond, je l’ai dit, et mignard, avec de petites lèvres en cerise noire qui ne donnent pas envie d’en goûter. Dans le regard, une béance avertit, comme un reflet de vacuités si profondes qu’il ne sait pas lui-même qu’elles sont ténébreuses. Sous Henri III il eût fait merveille, et quand je dis sous, je ne pense pas au règne mais au roi. (p.38)

Jokes like the pun in the first extract and the dig at Hector in the second are mischievous (and realistic) rather than malicious, and, as they are made at the expense of eighteenth-century characters, they harm no one but they do involve the reader in Queria’s reading. Jokes are meant to be shared and Queria shares hers with her readers. The register of the narration has a similar effect. Queria tells her story in a colloquial manner:

L’autre jour, une vieille – au fait, pas si vieille – documentaliste de la B.N. m’a demandé sans compassion, avec une curiosité qui n’était pas malsaine – elle voulait savoir, cette dame – comment je m’étais ramassé une gueule pareille. (p.147)

Queria’s narrative, with its hesitations, digressions and circumlocution, has an oral texture to it. It is as though she is speaking (or chatting) to the reader. Moreover, unlike Baroche’s specifically female nous of the ‘Postface’, Queria’s addresses both male and female readers.

In L’Hiver de beauté, it is not only Queria’s narrative but also the eighteenth-century narration which has an oral texture. Isabelle’s diary includes conversations with her maidservant, Hendrickje, within its narrative, without distinguishing them as direct speech:

Je n’essaie plus de la faire taire, de lui interdire certains mots; la beauté, la chance, pour elle, je l’ai compris, ne sont que de la santé. Elle me trouve solide, votre père l’était aussi, et même, je trouvais qu’il ne faisait rien d’assorti à sa carrure. Quand elle m’aide, le matin, à ma toilette, elle frôle mes seins, les pèse du regard, vous aurez du lait,
c'est sûr. Pour quel enfant, et de quel homme assez fou pour me vouloir, maintenant? Elle hausse les épaules, qui vous parle de séduire? (p.34)

Isabelle writes as if she is thinking aloud, while the rhythm of the punctuation creates a sense of breathing – of the oral. This has the effect of drawing the reader in. S/he becomes party to Isabelle’s thoughts as she is thinking them.27

On the other hand, as the novel proceeds, the narrative style changes somewhat. Queria’s narrative alternates with the writing of her fictional version of Isabelle, and while the inclusion of the reader is maintained by revealing information about Queria’s own life and feelings, s/he may feel simultaneously excluded because Queria now shares her thoughts on her reading and writing with the character, Barney. In the final part, the reader is excluded still further, as an omniscient narrator takes over:

Elle eut envie de rire. Seul et gai. J’ai besoin qu’il m’aime mais pas trop, besoin qu’il soit là mais pas trop. Bon Dieu, la vie allait la prendre! Pour quoi était-elle faite? Elle croyait le savoir maintenant. Pour vivre et c’était vaste. (p.289)

Although Queria is still expressed by je here, and even though the oral register is retained, the reader is party to her thoughts only through the medium of the narrator. Even at the very end of the novel, where the two narratives converge, where the moi of the final phrase, ‘tu m’étouffes’, is that of both Isabelle and Queria, the omniscient narrator is always present: ‘Je suis au port, pensait Queria’ (p.319). However, in L’Hiver de beauté, a transition (parallel to this narrative structure) takes place in a move from Queria’s un-named, uncertain and shadowy je in the first half of the novel to a named, reconstructed character on the brink of a new life in the second; the reader only learns Queria’s name after her reconstructive surgery (p.200).28 This transformation echoes (and is echoed by) the parallel reconstruction of Isabelle’s identity.
In *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Laclos’s cold, manipulative, evil but nonetheless fascinating Mme. de Merteuil is an actively seductive, intelligent, powerful woman, who has been claimed as a feminist heroine. However, for her success, she depends on men finding her seductive and also on maintaining a facade of social respectability. The ending of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* takes away her beauty, her financial security and her respectability and leaves Mme. de Merteuil with nothing, with no possible way of continuing to live in that particular society. In *L’Hiver de beauté*, Isabelle, Baroche’s recreation of Laclos’s character, returns to her roots in Rotterdam. With the support of the mutually fulfilling relationships she establishes within the community of women in which she finds herself, Isabelle is gradually able to reconstruct her identity. In fact, during the course of Baroche’s novel, it becomes clear that Isabelle has not lost everything; she still has her seductive voice, her intelligence, her fighting spirit and her vitality. Interestingly, the extent of Isabelle’s transformation and reconstruction of her identity in *L’Hiver de beauté* is expressed in mythical terms. From the identity of *la méduse terrifiante*, which is given to her at the beginning of the novel because of the devastating effects of the small-pox on her once-beautiful features (p. 15), she becomes *la sirène borgne*, a mythical identity which undermines stereotypical ideas that beauty is a prerequisite to women’s seductiveness. Crucially, in *L’Hiver de beauté*, Isabelle is not the seductive and threatening siren who lures men to their ruin such as Laclos created in his Mme. de Merteuil. In Baroche’s novel, Isabelle’s seductiveness is not necessarily threatening to men; her relationship with Armand-Marie is not one of manipulation nor is it one of need, but it is mutually desired by two active, independent individuals.

Isabelle may not conform to traditional conceptions of a romantic heroine, but as a reconstructed character perhaps she meets the aspirations of many twentieth-century
women. She is active, independent, determined, desiring, seductive, and comes to be loved by both women and men for herself rather than for her appearance. She stands up for her rights and fights those who attack her: for example, she takes her revenge on Hector for burning Vairville by disfiguring him with a potte (p. 98). On the other hand, Isabelle is able to love and give to others, showing both respect and tenderness to Hendrickje and Anneke and becoming a ‘mother’ to her nephew, Colin, as if he were her own child.

Both Queria and Isabelle find new ways of living, each in their own socio-cultural context. Isabelle, removed first from the pre-French Revolution court-life of her identity as Laclos’s Mme. de Merteuil, and then from the bourgeois environment of Rotterdam, is freed from the restrictions of both these societies as she embarks on a new life in the as yet undetermined and uncharted colonies of the New World. As a modern, financially-independent woman, Queria (like Flore and Elodie in Les Ports du silence) can embark on a (heterosexual) love relationship in which neither dependency nor possession figure. With the reconstruction of these characters’ identities, Baroche inscribes ways of ‘being a woman’ and of living relationships which become possible along with changing social structures. The initially uncertain identities of the narrative subjects (Queria and Isabelle) are resolved in positive representations of women’s identity.

Baroche’s work is widely read by men and women; although L’Hiver de beauté can be described as a women-centred novel for its portrayal of women’s conversations, bodies, feelings, everyday lives and experiences, and as a feminist novel for its recuperation and reconstruction of the female character from Laclos’s canonical text and for its interrogation of the links between beauty and women’s sexuality, her male readership is not necessarily excluded. Traditional stereotypes of men (as well as of
women) are subverted: the male characters may be conventionally masculine in their activity and independence (both Armand-Marie and Barney travel the world, one as a ship-owner, the other as a dealer in metals), but they are also sympathetically portrayed as ‘un peu féminin[s]’ (p.283) in their passivity, introspection and emotional needs.\textsuperscript{31} In \textit{L’Hiver de beauté}, Hector may represent a stereotypically misogynist man, but Isabelle begins to think about other men differently:

\begin{quote}
J’ai si longtemps guetté les reflets du désir sur ces visages sans rien y chercher d’autre, j’ai eu tort. Ils sont comme nous, ils ont des tristesses, des terreur abruties dans la bière alors que nous pleurons. Mais quand ils écoutent ma voix ou celles de leur compagnons, quand ils se réfugient derrière leurs mains, je sais bien qu’ils pleurent aussi, des larmes amères et sèches, des larmes fantômes. (p.74)
\end{quote}

and Queria questions received (feminist) ideas about men:

\begin{quote}
Peut-être après tout revenait-on du désir des hommes, de leurs idées prédéchues, de leur effet miroir insultant si l’on réfléchit bien, des putres ou des santies. Jamais complètes, jamais adultes. Enfin c’est ce qu’on dit qu’ils disent… On les simplifie trop, je crois. (p.157)
\end{quote}

Neither Queria nor Isabelle generalise or reduce men to stereotypes, but meet them with understanding.

In \textit{L’Hiver de beauté}, narrative structure and characterisation draw the reader in. Intensified by the \textit{mise en abyme} of reading about reading, this has the effect of encouraging the reader to consider Queria-the-reader as an alter ego. Queria is an active reader, interpreting, questioning and creative. The reader of \textit{L’Hiver de beauté} is thus also encouraged to read creatively, to interact with the text, and to interrogate his/her own attitudes and ideas. Queria’s interpretation of the rape episode engages the reader’s own attitudes. On the one hand, it is possible to accept Queria’s version unquestioningly and consider Isabelle’s reaction as an empowering example of a woman fighting back against rape. However, it is clear from the text that Queria creates the situation she wants to find.
The reader in turn, therefore, has to interrogate his/her own sympathies, identifications and attitudes, and to decide what meaning s/he wants to give to the event. On the other hand, Queria's clearly subjective reading and the pleasure she finds in reading (about) Isabelle draws the reader's attention to his/her own subjective reading position. If we are seduced by our reading, as Queria is by hers, we are also encouraged to recognise and to admit our own complicity.

**Example 3:**

There are two dedications in Baroche's *Les Ports du silence*. The first dedication reads: 'Pour toi, seul *amer* essentiel et pour tous ces livres aimés presque autant ...'. For the reader opening Baroche's novel, this dedication can be read in different ways. On the one hand, 'toi' is the reader and this novel is, therefore, dedicated to the (loved) reader as the most important point of reference to the author. On the other hand, the very use of the familiar 'toi' suggests that it is addressed to someone familiar to the author rather than to the (unknown) reader. Baroche's reader is thus simultaneously included and excluded by this first dedication. The second dedication two pages later states: 'J'espère qu'on me pardonnera de faire allusion sans repos à quelques textes essentiels (pour moi). A l'intention de ceux qui aiment lire - à qui d'ailleurs je dédie ce roman pour une part...'

On this occasion, the reader is without doubt the (part) dedicatee but this time the author uses the impersonal *on* and *ceux*. This second dedication, therefore, either confirms or adds to the first but does not clarify it.

The uncertainty which thus faces the reader even before the beginning of the text sets the tone for the novel, and indeed this uncertainty is reinforced by the many narrative perspectives. *Les Ports du silence* is a novel of many voices: *je* is often Jaime but
sometimes Louise, Marthe, Miriam, or even (via her diary) the late Adeline; there is also dialogue and narration in the third person. The reader is drawn into the text by the direct address vous (see, for example, pp.212; 254), only to find s/he is not the addressee; the vous refers to groups of unspecified characters. Nevertheless in this novel, in spite of the multiple narrative positions, it is usually clear who is speaking, as chapters and sections are often headed with the speaker’s name. Paradoxically, however, this very factor has the effect of reinforcing the reader’s uncertainty. The different narrators offer different viewpoints, different attitudes and even contradictory facts. For example, Elodie’s ‘presque laideur’ is discussed (p.28), indeed she describes herself as ‘laide’ (p.32), and Jaime refers to her as ‘pas belle’ (p.77), yet Miriam talks about her beauty (p.132). Jaime remembers in detail the occasion when Adeline took away from him Giono's *Un Roi sans divertissement*, returning it to him with the underlined sentence: “Méfiez-vous de la vérité, Langlois, elle est vraie pour tout le monde!” He has no doubt that it was she who had underlined it with ‘cette vigueur agressive qu’elle pouvait manifeste certains jours’ (p.152). However, Adeline’s diary entry about that event reads: ‘Je lui ai rendu son livre sans commentaires. A quoi bon? Certaines mises en garde sont pires que le silence’ (p.159). Either Jaime’s memory is playing tricks on him or Adeline underlined the sentence unconsciously and in spite of herself. The reader is left to make up his/her own mind.

In a further paradox, this uncertainty is an effect of Baroche’s renowned realism: different people do see things in different ways; beauty is subjective; our memory does play tricks on us. The reader simultaneously recognises the realistic nature of Baroche’s narrative structure yet has to deal with the uncertainty of different viewpoints. The reader is at once involved in the text yet liberated from its authority. This is paradoxical because
realist literature is commonly held to comfort its readers (by presenting and confirming
a unitary representation of reality) rather than to unsettle them. Baroche’s (almost)
hyper-realism is seductive: in Les Ports du silence, Jaime reads real books and references
are made to the novel’s Camargue setting; in ‘Le Lézard d’or’, Benoîte sees a real film,
Don Giovanni, in a recognisably contemporary Paris (Mac Donalds [sic], Pariscope,
streets full of Japanese tourists), and the real-life film director, Joseph Losey, is
fictionalised. The reader is drawn into the fiction by familiar references and, in Les Ports
du silence, the effect of this is to encourage identification with Jaime as a reader; our
reading, like Jaime’s, provides us with cultural references which we apply to real life.

Baroche’s narrative structures and characterisation therefore have a dual effect. On
the one hand, they are inclusive techniques which draw the reader into the text, but on the
other hand, they foster uncertainty and in this way encourage an active reading. The
reader has to build up a picture of the characters from various observations, and although
some of these viewpoints may coincide, the picture offered is necessarily an uncertain
and incomplete one. In Les Ports du silence, Jaime has both traditionally-assigned
masculine and feminine qualities: he is active and passive, practical and cerebral, a real
man (p.63), ‘un homme d’intérieur [...] sans guère d’ambitions’ (p.102), a romantic and a
realist, inconsistent, ‘un fils du vent’ (p.127). He is seductive to women of all ages, but
no one (not even he) knows what he is really like. Marthe suggests that he is seductive
because he asks women for nothing (p.62) but this also implies that they can thus inscribe
him with their own fantasies (and so too can the reader). Elodie is a free spirit, ‘ce chat
sauvage’ (p.29), ‘errante’ but with deep roots (p.128). She is ‘vivante’ (p.32) but also a
‘tueuse’. She too has both masculine and feminine qualities. She and Jaime are ‘deux
solitudes’ (p.254) but this does not preclude them from establishing a relationship which
suits them both. In *Les Ports du silence*, the characters escape easy categorisation, accommodating contradictory qualities and undermining traditional stereotypes.

Reading about reading in *Les Ports du silence* may be seductive, but Baroche’s readers are seduced to read in an active, creative way. Our reading may have a powerful impact on our lives but only if we, like Jaime, constantly revise our interpretations in the light of our real and changing experiences. The uncertainty which is a prominent feature of this novel shows us that reading is creative. Along with the characters, the reader has to create his/her own interpretation. Furthermore, the interaction of reading with life which is portrayed in *Les Ports du silence* encourages us to think about ourselves and our relationships in the light of those (which we co-create) in the novel.

**Example 4:**

Reading about reading Clarice Lispector in *Ilia* cannot be contained within that text, for, although *Ilia* can stand on its own, it forms part of a web – or a tapestry – of Cixous’s fictional and critical texts which interweave with and overflow into each other. The reading subject of both *Vivre l’Orange* and *Ilia* is always involved in an autobiographical slippage towards the author (Cixous) herself. In many of her critical and theoretical texts, and in papers and seminars, Cixous writes in similar terms about Lispector’s writing and its impact on her own work. In ‘Extreme Fidelity’, for example, she writes: ‘the greatest respect I have for any work whatsoever in the world is the respect I have for the work of Clarice Lispector’ (p.18). Cixous’s fictional and theoretical texts connect with each other: ‘L’Approche de Clarice Lispector’, *Vivre l’Orange* and *Ilia* are particularly close, re-working, re-presenting and developing similar material in different contexts. Expressions echo and repeat each other across the texts; for example,
the same passage appears in both ‘L’Approche de Clarice Lispector’ and Ilia: ‘Il y a une façon de dire tulipe qui tue toute tulipe. Il y a une façon clarice de faire-tulipe, et de la tige jusqu’aux prunelles je vois comme la tulipe est vraie’ (‘L’Approche’ p.131; Ilia, pp.155-56). The (un-named) writing-reading subject of the fictional Ilia and Cixous, who is openly the writing subject of the essay, ‘L’Approche de Clarice Lispector’, write exactly the same words.

Similarly:

Toucher le coeur des roses: c’est la manière-femme de travailler: toucher le coeur vivant des choses, être touchée, aller vivre dans le tout près, se rendre par de tendres attentives lenteurs jusqu’à la région du toucher, lentement se laisser porter, par la force d’attraction d’une rose, attirée jusqu’au sein de la région des roses, rester longtemps dans l’espace du parfum, apprendre à se laisser donner par les choses ce qu’elles sont au plus vivant d’elles-mêmes. (‘L’Approche’, p.122; Vivre l’Orange, p.107)

Here again, the words of Cixous, the essayist, and the narrator of a fiction text coincide. Such undoubtedly autobiographical connections put the whole matter of genre categorisation into question, and indeed Cixous has latterly succeeded in having her work de-classified by her publishers. This has implications for the way in which readers position themselves to the text, since readers undoubtedly approach a fiction text differently from a theoretical one. Nonetheless, the shadowy, fluid qualities of Cixous’s textual (fictional) je mean that she can never be either fully equated with or separated from the author (Cixous).

Cixous’s reader is constantly led out by echoes of other of her texts to her other texts, and indeed in Ilia, there is a specific reference to Vivre l’Orange within the text (p.132). This multi-layering of texts thus liberates her readers from the single text but it also holds them within her work, sending them into other Cixous texts. The impact that reading Lispector’s work has on Cixous’s reading-writing subject (and Cixous herself)
comes to fruition in her writing. Rather than simply emphasising the importance of reading (Clarice Lispector), the interdependence of Cixous’s texts has the effect of focussing the reader on Cixous’s own writing.

Cixous’s complex, poetical, intertextual writing has been criticised as elitist and difficult to read, but the textual echoes and repetitions which abound in her work go some way towards breeding reader familiarity with her concepts and her use of language. Reading about reading Clarice Lispector’s work helps readers to understand Cixous’s approach to writing and it gives them a way into reading her work. However, as Emma Wilson points out, this is also a controlling feature: ‘Indeed in writing about reading Lispector, Cixous may in fact be (c)overtly giving her readers and students a lesson in reading her own texts’ (Sexuality and the Reading Encounter, p.110). In this respect, Vivre l’Orange and Illa thus have a didactic dimension which establishes a favoured model for reading. In ‘Extreme fidelity’, Cixous writes:

I would no longer continue with my seminar if I knew that a sufficiently wide world was reading Clarice Lispector. A few years ago when her texts began to circulate here, I said to myself, I am no longer going to give a seminar, all that is left to do is to read her, everything is said, it is perfect. But as usual everything has been repressed, she has even been transformed in the most extraordinary way, they have embalmed her, had her stuffed as a Brazilian bourgeoise with varnished fingernails. So I carry on my vigil, accompanying her through my reading. (p.20)

In Cixous’s seminar, texts are approached slowly, visually, but also phonically, bodily and lovingly: ‘There are thirty ways into a text. Reading together in this way we bring the text into play. We take a page and everyone comes individually towards it. The text begins to radiate from these approaches. Slowly, we penetrate together to its heart’ (Writing Differences, p.148). This slow, multiple approach to reading finds its echo in Lispector’s approach which is celebrated in Illa: reading Lispector’s writing teaches Illa
how to approach (or to read) the world and thus enables her to write (p. 184). Indeed, as Verena Andermatt Conley points out in her introduction to *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, Cixous's readings of Clarice Lispector's texts are also read with her as she echoes Lispector's own practice: "Cixous, with Lispector, strives toward a mode of reading, writing, and speaking nonexclusive differences so that the other is other without being thought of in merely negative or positional terms such as that of the nonself".  

Cixous's ‘type d'échange où chacun conserverait l'autre en vie et en différence’ (‘Sorties’, p. 145) finds recognition in Lispector’s approach which is that of respect of and opening-up to the other. For Cixous, writing is an important way to work towards this seductive vision. Reading (with) Clarice Lispector nourishes Ilia, the writing self, and shows her the way forward. The reader recognises in the textual figuration of Ilia the exciting potential of Cixous's conceptual vision. The reading-writing subject in *Ilia* cannot, however, be separated completely from Cixous herself. Ilia is the figuration of a part of Cixous (and of other women); *Ilia*, the text, is the result of Cixous reading (with) Clarice Lispector and an example of the writing she can now produce. *Ilia* is thus about the creative outcome of Cixous reading (with) Lispector at the same time as it is itself also that outcome. In this respect, Cixous's theories influence the way the reader interprets her texts, and this is both controlling and enriching.

*Ilia*, published in 1980, is part of Cixous's (feminist) women-centred exploration of 'femininity' in writing and search for a different (lost) female subjectivity, a phase in her writing culminating in *Le Livre de Promethea*, published in 1983. Much of Cixous's work is published by *des femmes*, the women's publishing house in Paris, and her readership, particularly of her fictional texts from this period, is thus likely to be primarily a female one. Moreover, Cixous's women readers are implicitly yet directly
included in the narration of *Ilia*, as throughout the text the feminine narrative *je* slides into a specifically feminine *nous*. Indeed, Cixous's un-named narrative *je*, in itself, can be interpreted as relating to women generally, and to the individual woman reader. In the historico-politico-cultural context of its writing, this is thus a strategy which encourages the (woman) reader to share the narrative perspective. However, many women readers may resist or reject this inclusion, since many women (including many feminists) are alienated by one woman's assumption that she can speak for all women. Nonetheless, in *Ilia*, the collective feminine *nous* is open to various interpretations and explicitly slides between women who write, women generally and, at its most extreme, women universally (see p.127). To some extent, therefore, the reader is able to interpret the *nous* in *Ilia* as she wishes.

On the one hand, the figure of a lost archaic feminine identity for women, 'cette personne aux racines plus anciennes que celles de la raison' (p.40), may appear to make reference to a (universal) feminine essence, but on the other hand, the mythical dimension of this figuration is an enabling one:

> Il y avait dans cette femme extraordinaire outre les tendances qui unissent en elles les sens les plus opposés, une tendance à lier-délier, une tendance à précéder-suspendre, dans cette langue extraordinaire, une aptitude à penser une chose et son contraire, des mots composites, dans lesquels des vocables de sens opposé forment un tout qui exprime le sens d'un seul de ses éléments contrastés, sans que cette partie ne veuille dire qu'à l'exclusion des autres, une façon claire obscure intérieure-extérieure, rapide lente, calme irritable, d'être calme, rapide, transparente, intérieurement, aussi bien que toute autre. Alternativement ou ensemble. (p.40)

The linguistic liaison of contrasting qualities of such a figure allows it to escape enclosure in any defining essence and it can therefore offer a vision of both the reconciliation of opposites and the disruption of binaries within one subjectivity. This positive use of the oxymoron enables the slippage of 'Woman' as absolute to conceptual
‘women’ as fluid, plural potentialities, to which the individual woman reader can make connections. From their historical ‘mise en taire’ (p.54) by the restricting structures of thought and language, in *Ilia* women are encouraged to explore different ways of being, in order to become ‘étante[s]’ (‘feminine’ beings in the present) (p.53). The feminisation of the present participle of *être* is thus yet another way of suggesting potentialities of *being* differently which have not yet been thought. The language play draws attention to itself by the creation of the neologism: ‘une étante’ (a feminine being) must therefore be different from ‘un être’ (a universal being – in the masculine). Cixous’s readers are thus led – and left – to speculate about different and potential ways of being, each one of them to create their own different visions for themselves.

In *Ilia*, textual figurations and poetical language bring into being (textually) the unrepresentable and the unexpressible. Cixous does not create literary characters in the traditional way but she figures and expresses visions and potentialities, allowing her (women) readers to speculate and to create for themselves.

Cixous’s poetical style of writing is as important to her work as her content; in *Ilia*, both aspects work together:

Et il y a celles dont je n’ai pas envie de parler, pas envie de m’éloigner en parlant, pas envie de parler avec les paroles qui s’éloignent des choses, et le bruit de leur pas couvre les pulsations des choses, et avec les paroles qui tombent sur les choses et figent leur frémissement, et les désaccordent et les assourdissent; je crains la chute des paroles sur leur voix. Je peux adorer une voix. Je suis une femme: l’amour de la voix: rien n’est plus puissant que l’intime toucher d’une voix voilée, profonde mais réservée venant me réveiller le sang; le premier rayon d’une voix qui vient à la rencontre du coeur nouveau-né. Mon cœur est dans l’appartenance d’une voix taillée dans l’obscurité brillante, d’une proximité infiniment tendre et réservée. Une femme-voix, voilée de vert amande. (p.132)

The difference between *parole* and *voix* is emphasised in this extract. Words enable us to express ourselves but they may also be limiting. We can only say what language allows
us to say and therefore we are spoken by the language we use: ‘la langue nous raconte la promenade avant que nous l’ayons accomplie en vie’ (Ilia, p.137).

Words (paroles) may thus limit meaning: indeed, the passage suggests that things (or women) cannot be described without reducing them and losing their specificity. Moreover, the Word (Logos) carries with it the god-like power and authority of naming. Nonetheless, in Cixous’s work, the verbal rhythms of voice (voix), linked in Cixousian terms with drives and the pre-oedipal, are an important element of poetical, evocative, ‘feminine’ writing.

The punctuation, alliteration and repetition of words, phrases and sounds in the above example create a rhythmic, poetical expression of the point Cixous is making; moreover, they can be read as the effects of ‘voice’ in a written text. The repetition of paroles, parler and other words beginning with ‘p’ in the first half of the passage, which gives way to the repetition of voix and ‘v’ sounds in the second, echoes and reinforces the meaning: in order to express the inexpressible, paroles have to give way to voix.

Cixous’s rhythmic poetical language elicits a bodily response in the reader which is echoed in the bodily resonances of her images. In Ilia, the progressive chilling and falling conveyed by the proliferation of such images and words creates a growing negative effect which draws the reader along into it (p.123); more positively, the profusion of sensual and sexual (bodily) images, words, and sounds are seductive to read (for example, p.99), while the multitude of women-centred images and metaphors of maternity, nourishment, engendering, birth, have familiar resonances for some (but certainly not all) of Cixous’s women readers (see, for example, p.27). Long sentences running for several pages, broken up by punctuation (commas, dashes, line breaks, indentations), create the rhythm and allow readers to assimilate the sense easily but the lack of a full stop holds them in the text and keeps them reading. Cixous’s (poetical) prose is meditative and detailed; her
work can be dense and difficult to read but the rhythmic nature of her language and syntax is seductive, draws her readers in and holds them, as well as intensifying and reinforcing the impact of the content of her writing.\textsuperscript{43}

The question of reader positions and positioning is an important one in respect of the way Cixous' work has been critically received. On the one hand, some critics reject it for its utopian lack of materialism, whereas others find it inspiring and creative. Although these responses reflect the varied critical and theoretical standpoints of the various critics, Cixous' work has indeed met with extreme responses. The first major studies of her work are nearly all uncritical celebrations and explanations, and, despite the fact that most scholarly literary studies are initiated by the subjective interest of the researcher, it is unusual to find so many non-critical studies.\textsuperscript{44} This state of affairs may in part be explained by the seductive nature of the form, style and content of Cixous' writing, which creates a spiral or a web in which the reader is held in a multi-layered, interweaving reading of (the) text(s). On the other hand, the density and complexity of Cixous' fiction may go some way to deterring those who are not seduced by her work from working on it.

Cixous and her textual reading subject (je) experience a powerful and meaningful identification with Clarice Lispector, establishing an open, generous model of reading and perhaps suggesting a reading approach to their own texts. However, Cixous' language play, and the multiplicity, fluidity and instability of textual identities in \textit{Ilía} elicit an active response from her readers who are thus given the freedom to inscribe into their reading their own creative interpretations of the voices, vision and potentialities figured in the text. Word-play draws attention to the limitations of language and,
importantly, encourages interrogation of its (political) power. In *Ilha*, the reader is never allowed to remain a passive partner in Cixous's textual seduction.

These examples of reading (about) reading reveal a tension in the relations between the text and its readers, between seduction and alienation, inclusion and exclusion. Working with other textual effects, the *mise en abyme* of reading about reading contributes to these relations, but specifically it draws attention to the reading process and encourages the reader of the text to think about his/her own reading. The question of reader identification is, however, a complex interaction of the reading constructed by the text and the subjectivity of the reader. Identifications can be made through differences as much as common factors, against characters or situations as well as with them. Gender in reading is never a simple matter, and, clearly, readers do not necessarily identify with characters of their own gender. The reader's gender is part of his/her subjectivity, and as such is a factor which may play a part in reading. It may or may not figure as a major positioning force in any particular reading. Textual strategies and effects which construct gendered reading positions have an important role to play in this respect but individual reader response cannot necessarily be anticipated.

In different ways, in all the cases under consideration, the textual effects combine to encourage an active reading: readers are able, and indeed are encouraged, to create their own interpretations. Reading about other readers reading, and recognising the subjective nature of those readings, in turn encourages the reader of that text to recognise, and to question, their own subjective position and attitudes. Furthermore, in all the examples, reading about reading has the effect of leading the readers out of the specific text to make connections with other texts and with their own and others' lives and
experiences. In the texts considered, reading about reading has the effect of leading us towards an interrogation of the structures (social, cultural, political, philosophical, linguistic) which construct our identities.

Perhaps however reading about reading is seductive in itself, for the reader is reading about what s/he is doing – s/he is reading about him/herself reading (even if this is through difference). This may indeed encourage self-reflection, although such self-reflection is not necessarily of a self-indulgent nature since, in the texts studied, self-reflection leads to self-interrogation. Moreover, a tension between the author, the text and the reader is revealed. Writing about reading may acknowledge the pleasure of reading (for all writers are first readers), but, in all these examples, it also testifies to the power of reading, and thus perhaps to the power – if not the authority – of the text. The mise en abyme of reading about reading offers examples of reading but it also presents models of reading (the text). This may be didactic, but it is not necessarily authoritative. It may betray a certain tension (or agon) on the part of the author towards the reader’s reading, but in all these texts this is tempered by the fact that an active, interrogative reading is encouraged. It may be a way of initiating, even directing, the reader towards an open, considered reading, but it does not pretend to control it. More intense agonistic tensions may, however, be revealed when the writing process itself is the subject of reading.

READING ABOUT WRITING

The creative process, the process of writing itself, has been an explicit feature of twentieth-century French fiction, from Proust to le nouveau roman, from surrealism to much post-1968 fiction. Authorial concerns with originality, literary criticism, language and different perceptions of reality are addressed in this way and incorporated into
fictional texts. This section considers text/reader relations in respect of the explicit
textness of the text, and focuses primarily on examples of textuality and intertextuality in
Cixous’s *L’Ange au secret* and Baroche’s *L’Hiver de beauté* and *Les Ports du silence*.

In different ways, all of Cixous’s fiction texts make overt reference to the process
of (their) writing and, in many cases, (for example, *Le Livre de Promethea, Jours de l’an,
L’Ange au secret*), they are about their writing. In Baroche’s *L’Hiver de beauté*, the
process of writing is a major feature but her other novels, *Les Ports du silence* and *La
Rage au bois dormant*, are also fictions in the making. In ‘L’Abîme et après’, Baroche
herself describes *L’Hiver de beauté* as ‘une réflexion sur la création’ (p.76) while, in *The
Hélène Cixous Reader*, Mireille Calle-Gruber refers to Cixous’s subject (in both senses)
as ‘the unparalleled subject of writing [...] writing matter, producer of the text’ (p.216).

In all these examples, the reader is witness to the process of the creation of the text
that s/he is reading. This is backgrounded somewhat in Baroche’s *Les Ports du silence*
and *La Rage au bois dormant*, but the multiple narrative perspectives in these novels
emphasise the textual process: readers must work with the different viewpoints to
(co-)create a coherent account of the events. Furthermore, the change in narrative
structure at the end of both these novels draws attention to the fiction of the fiction. In
*Les Ports du silence*, the final chapter takes the form of a letter from Adeline to Jaime
which may be the invention of the narrators, (‘la ville’), who admit that they have no way
of knowing its true content (p.270) – or perhaps it is the ‘real’ letter. Similarly, in *La
Rage au bois dormant*, Judith and Adèle tell their stories but in the final chapter an
omniscient narrator takes over. Their individual stories have become *the* story: ‘leurs
vies, à Judith et à elle, avaient été de vrais romans, non?’ (p.326).
In Baroche's *L'Hiver de beauté*, the reader is party to the writing process. Queria (implicitly) takes the reader into her confidence, sharing her thoughts, admitting that she invents and imagines certain events, and confessing that she is tempted to kill off Hector in her book even though ‘in reality’ he lived for another twenty years (p.261). Likewise, in Cixous’s *Le Livre de Promethea, je* shares her concerns about writing the book; in *Jours de l'an*, the narrator’s self-interrogation regarding the identity of ‘the author’ is confiding; and in *L'Ange au secret*, the writing subject draws the reader along with her on her journey to writing.

In *L'Hiver de beauté*, Queria-the-reader (of Isabelle’s diaries) becomes Queria-the-writer as she writes her own version of Isabelle’s life. Her writing comes out of a complex mix of details from her reading, her imagination and her life. She finds references to the seduction of Isabelle’s voice in Madeleine’s letter to Minna (p.18) and in a historical chronicle (pp.65-66), and she makes this a central quality of her fictional Isabelle. In order to write her book, however, Queria has to fill the gaps in the textual remnants of Isabelle’s life as, for example, when she imagines events of the voyage to South America (p.309). Indeed, Queria’s story of Isabelle picks up echoes from Queria’s own life: after her operation, Queria’s mental voyages are echoed in Isabelle’s voyage to France (p.187), and Isabelle’s final departure from France coincides with Queria leaving behind her old face after the reconstructive surgery she undergoes (p.198). As Baroche’s novel proceeds, Queria discusses her writing with Barney, who becomes a reader (of Queria’s text). Barney is increasingly involved in Queria’s writing, encouraging and questioning her: he wants to know how she creates her fiction, how she mixes reading, life and imagination. Initially, Queria resists his questions: ‘Evidemment, si le lecteur veut en plus assister au démontage de la belle ouvrage qui le fait jouir, c’est aussi
déprimant qu’une “magie” qu’on explique!’ (p.252). She wants to protect Barney from disillusion but also to maintain the mystique of her art – and to retain authorial control – but eventually she involves him. In *L’Hiver de beauté*, Queria initially ends her account of Isabelle’s story with the latter’s exaggerated curtsey to the wind which finally propels the becalmed ship on its way to the New World but which also breaks the romantic moment between her and Armand-Marie (p.315); however, she finally gives in and writes a second ending to Isabelle’s story: ‘A l’aube, Isabelle s’ébroua, et dit de sa voix si limpide qu’elle allait traverser deux siècles, mon amour, oh mon amour, lève-toi de là, tu m’étouffes’ (p.319). She thus ends her book in accordance with the desire of Barney-the-reader, by giving Isabelle something to say to Armand-Marie which she (Queria) could say to Barney. Although the introduction of Barney as reader of Queria’s text and party to her thoughts may have the effect of distancing Baroche’s readers somewhat from their initial position of inclusion, Barney-the-reader as co-creator of the text in turn becomes their alter ego.

In the final change of narrative perspective, with the advent of an omniscient narrator, another layer of textness is revealed as (the ‘reborn’) Queria in turn becomes a fictionalised character. The effect of this is reinforced still further by the ‘Postface’ which follows, where Baroche herself comments on the writing of the novel (*L’Hiver de beauté*) that the reader has just read. The omniscient narrator in the final section fulfils the reader’s desire to know what happens but, as in Baroche’s other two novels, this satisfaction can only be momentary; the ‘reality’ constructed within the fiction is explicitly declared a fiction. Baroche’s readers, like Barney, have to recognise that the ending is in reality simply an ending – one ending among many possible endings. There
is thus no definitive ending; there can always be others, and, like Barney too, the readers can invent their own.

From the very beginning of Cixous’s *L’Ange au Secret*, the reader is drawn in by the narrator (*je* implicitly, by means of the inclusive *nous* (although sometimes its referents vary), and explicitly, by direct address:

(Écoutez-moi, vous, perdus avec moi, lecteurs, parce que je vous parle de vous aussi, de vos voyages dans les cavernes, et pourquoi nous avons tant aimé Jules Verne, et parlez-moi je vous écoute, ceci est un coup de téléphone, vous le recevez? Vous m’entendez? Je disais:) (p.11)

This bracketed passage takes the form of an intervention in the text and, as such, forcefully implicates the readers into making the journey with the narrator, a journey which takes her within herself accompanied and guided by literary references and which is a necessary part of coming to writing. This journey is the subject of the text, it leads to the writing of the text, and indeed the journey is the text. *L’Ange au secret* is a text about its own writing. Both the *nous* and the direct address to the readers (‘lecteurs’) are particularly interesting for their non-exclusion of the masculine gender, contrasting in this way with Cixous’s earlier, uncompromisingly women-centred fiction, such as *Ilia*.

Similarly, *nous* also identifies the feminine *je* with other writers (male and female) and as such differs from the *nous* in *Ilia* which identifies the *je* in that text specifically with other women writers. Whereas the constructed readership of *Ilia* (and of other texts from Cixous’s overtly ‘feminist’ period) is female, in *L’Ange au secret* it is emphatically non-exclusionary.

Having drawn the readers into the text in this way, the narrative *je* takes them on a journey of and to the writing of the text. This entails a journey within the self to uncover pain and fear as well as the fear of (re)discovering that pain and fear. Writing comes out
of pain (illness, loss): writing is painful. Je is accompanied on her journey by her guides, other writers, for example, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Lispector, Poe, Shakespeare, Tsvetayeva, whom, she deduces from their texts, have also confronted similar fear and pain.

In *L'Ange au secret*, the narrator shares with the reader the secrets and difficulties involved in the process of (coming to) the writing of this text; she suggests alternative ways of proceeding – for example, she could just break off a difficult chapter (p.68) – and stresses that this discussion is also the text itself: ‘(Pendant ce temps, sans que nous le sachions, le livre continuait à s’écrire)’ (p.67). Throughout the text the readers’ involvement is maintained with the use of *nous* and their engagement elicited by means of *vous* and *tu*; they are constantly party to *je*’s meditative, interrogative, confessional and self-reflexive narration. For example, *je* meditates on how writers like Dostoyevsky and Poe make use of real crimes and death in fictional works and considers the difference between *manger* and *se nourrir* in these terms – the difference between using such an event in their own writing and being so deeply affected by a powerful event that their writing is changed (or even created) by it. She goes on to relate this problematic to the place and role of the death of her own father in her own (coming to) writing (p.164).

Finally, the text (this text) is written: the narrator, like her guides has gone ‘jusqu’au bout’ in order to be able to write (p.234), but she agonises that she has not been able to write the ‘truth’ (p.256). Right to the very end, therefore, the readers of *L’Ange au secret* are party to the textual process:

Attention maintenant, tout dépend des lecteurs: la vérité est là. Elle me fuit. Je vous en prie, attrapez-la! Sur le vif! Là! Là! Là! Elle est à vous!
(Vous l’avez? Dites, vous l’avez?) (p.257)
These are the last words of the text, which thus ends without a full stop. It is for the reader to continue its creation. The writer’s ultimate challenge to her readers is to engage with the text that has been written: they are responsible for finding their own truths in their reading.

A similar process of textuality is thus revealed in both *L’Hiver de beauté* and *L’Ange au secret*. In Baroche’s novel, Queria represents the writer who is first a reader; Barney is the reader who is necessary to give meaning to the text and who is also its co-creator; and Queria is also the figure of the author who desires to retain control over the writing of the text but who finally has to abdicate authority over it to allow the reader to contribute to its meaning. Likewise, in Cixous’s text, the narrator (the writing subject) acknowledges her authorial debt to her literary guides (and to her reading); the reader is involved and engaged in the creative process; and finally, the writing subject has to release the text to allow the reader to interpret its meaning.

Although these textual figurations of the textual process testify to both authorial antagonism and generosity regarding the text and its readers, they also emphasise the importance of reading and of the reader. The writing subjects within the texts (and perhaps the authors themselves too) may wish to reveal the complexity (as well as the pleasure and the pain) of the writing process and to elicit their readers’ appreciation of it, but the involvement of the reader in this way also reveals the textual process as a democratic one.

Democracies rely on (ant)agonistic relationships, however, and it is tension as well as dialogue that provides their motivating force. The process of textuality is no different in this respect: even though traditional authorial authority may be weakened to enable reader participation, to some extent in both Baroche’s and Cixous’s work the author
makes her presence (and thus perhaps her authority) felt within the text. In *L'Ange au secret*, as in *Illa*, although the text’s status as autobiography is uncertain, there is a slippage between the writing subject (*je*) and the figure of Cixous herself.\(^{47}\) *L'Ange au secret* is saturated with a vast array of literary references and authors, from Homer, Virgil, Dante and Shakespeare to Poe, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Bachmann, Bernhard and Lispector. Using such authors as her guides, the writing subject thus includes herself in a literary community of distinguished writers. The relationship is not, however, deemed to be a hierarchical one since her guides *flanquent* – they accompany and support rather than lead (p.33). She is, therefore, pointedly (and politically) associating writers like Lispector (and by implication Cixous) with classical authors of the mainstream literary canon.

For Cixous’s readers, however, this is more than just literary name-dropping: not only does the slippage between narrator and author (together with the doubling effect of reading about reading) suggest that they use Cixous and her texts as their own literary guides, but also such blatant intertextuality must always have repercussions on the politics of reading. Such a wide spectrum of references is bound to induce anxiety in the readers whose own ‘reading autobiographies’ are unlikely to include the same authors or texts, and yet who, by means of these very references, are made to feel that their knowledge of them is assumed. Nevertheless, intertextual references are a feature and an intrinsic part of all Cixous’s fictional writing.\(^{48}\)

In the section, ‘Suivons le géranium’ (pp.113-28), of Cixous’s *L’Ange au secret*, je draws the reader along with her in a consideration of crime and guilt as she makes associations between Dostoyevsky’s *The Devils* and Poe’s ‘The Murders in the rue Morgue’.\(^{49}\) She suggests that in spite of his confession, Dostoyevsky’s character,
Stavrogin, is not guilty of the crime he wanted to commit, that of the rape of the twelve-year old girl, Matryosha. Explicitly following the way in which Poe’s narrative in ‘The Murders in the rue Morgue’ implicitly includes his readers in an examination of its two murders (by means of Dupin’s use of ‘we’), je takes her readers on a visit to the scene of Stavrogin’s crime (the blue-painted house where Matryosha lives). In L’Ange au secret, je suggests that the narrative gap, ‘la scène coupée’ (p.111) of ‘Stavrogin’s Confession’ covers up the extent to which his crime fails. In response to Stavrogin’s advances, Matryosha puts her arms round him and kisses him. She loves and desires him, and thereby shifts the power relations between them. In L’Ange au secret, je suggests that Dostoyevsky’s Matryosha thus becomes unrapeable (p.122). Stavrogin cannot take anything from her that she does not want to give him. Matryosha takes his crime away from him; it cannot be a crime because she wants it. The crime Stavrogin does commit is, however, according to je, a far crueller murder even than the savage attacks committed by Poe’s Ourang-Outang in ‘The Murders in the rue Morgue’. In The Devils, Stavrogin subsequently ignores Matryosha, flaunting his sexual relationship with another woman in front of her; he hates and fears her, wanting her death, and he makes no move to stop her committing suicide, even though he suspects that is her intention.

In L’Ange au secret, the red spider on the geranium leaf, which, in The Devils, Stavrogin contemplates while Matryosha hangs herself and which becomes the symbol of his crime and guilt, provides the thread which leads je to look within herself and to find a forgotten childhood memory and a crime of her own. The red spider leads her to a garden where, with the intensity of childhood, she decided to kill a little girl, her own Matryosha, by giving her an apple core (a murder weapon suggested by the story, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs). The readers too are involved in je’s self-questioning: ‘Si j’avais pu
tuer Matroicha, l’aurais-je fait? Ne l’aurais-je pas fait? Et vous? Aurions-nous tué Matroicha?’ (p.133). Engaged specifically by means of the direct address vous, the readers are encouraged to undertake a similar self-interrogation of their own.

In L’Ange au secret, these literary references are used as an explanation of the way in which je, as a writer, considers other authors as guides. This exposition is extended over several sections of the text and as such does not necessarily presuppose or require the readers’ prior knowledge of the texts referred to, although a greater sense of inclusion is likely to be experienced by readers who are familiar with both The Devils and ‘The Murders in the rue Morgue’. References of this sort may produce reader anxiety but, in the case in point, the references are clearly given and therefore offer the reader a variety of possibilities for further reading. Je’s particular interpretation of Stavrogin’s crime and confession has the effect of leading the reader back to Dostoyevsky’s text and this in turn can enrich future readings of Cixous’s own text. In this respect, readers of Baroche’s L’Hiver de beauté might also make some intertextual associations of their own between Baroche’s novel and Cixous’s reading of Dostoyevsky in relation to the part of women’s sexuality in the power relations of rape. In different ways, in these texts both Isabelle and Matryosha use their sexuality to change the power relations between themselves and their assailants.51

In contrast, Cixous’s employment of intertextuality in Jours de l’an is somewhat different. In a discussion of authorial identity, a reference is made to a text by Clarice Lispector in which the sexual identity of its author is called into question. The only clue to the reference is a character’s name, Macabea, and the point is sketchy and unclear if the reader does not know the Lispector text concerned. The narrator, however, admits the inadequacy of her explanation: ‘je raconte mal cette histoire’ (p.160), thus, to some
extent, allaying the exclusion if not the confusion of the reader. Nevertheless, readers who are familiar with Cixous’s work can easily identify Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star* which Cixous has written about many times.[^52] On the one hand, therefore, the point of this intertextual reference relies on (even if it does not go as far as presupposing) prior knowledge of other Cixous texts; on the other hand, however, the confusion conveyed by the paucity of the reference can be seen as a trope for the whole text which is about the uncertain identity of the writing self.

This example returns us to the person of the author in Cixous’s work: on the one hand, the blurred boundaries between fiction, theory and autobiography inscribe the person of Cixous as an ever-present author-figure into her texts – an inscription which Emma Wilson suggests choreographs their reading (*Sexuality and the Reading Encounter*, p.110); on the other hand, the status of this author-figure is always unstable and unknowable. In *Le Livre de Promethea*, the narrator (*je*) is only an author (p.12) while the ‘deux vraies faiseuses’ of the text are Promethea and H (p.11). Indeed, H, who at times also becomes the narrator/writing subject, could perhaps be equated with Cixous – she writes, for example, of her ‘belles théories’ of ‘la bisexualité’ (p.13) – but this is never simple: *Je* is both *Je* and H (p.18). In *Jours de l’an*, ‘l’auteur’ is fictionalised (while writing the text) and in *Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu*, a fictionalised ‘Auteur’ provides just one of the narrative voices of the text, brought in (or created) by the narrative *je* to tell a story.

Moreover, the uncertainty of the identity of the author-figure in Cixous’s fiction is echoed by her own textualisation of Clarice Lispector. While *Vivre l’Orange* and *Ilia* refer to Clarice Lispector as the real-life author, in other texts, such as *Déluge* and *Jours de l’an*, Lispector’s name refers to a fictionalised figure of a (woman) writer. In this way,
the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred, and readers are obliged to recognize that the author is actually a construction of the text and, importantly, of their own interpretation. In *L'Ange au secret*, Cixous/the writing subject betrays her own idealisation of Lispector – or need to identify with her – by expressing the problem she has admitting that Lispector’s favourite author is Simenon (p. 102). However, in this case, if ‘the author’ is fictional, the authority of any such statement has to be treated with scepticism. On this occasion, where both Lispector and Cixous are fictionalised, the reader cannot therefore rely on the authority or reality of any authorial statements. Furthermore, the effect of calling into question the identity of the author to this extent must also have implications for readers in respect of their own identities: by means of direct and indirect address, they too are constructed (and fictionalised) by the texts.

In Baroche’s case, her authorial presence operates from the very beginning of her novel, *Les Ports du silence*, with her (part) dedication to her readers and her apparently generous gesture of giving references for the major intertexts, Giono’s *Un Roi sans divertissement* and Bosco’s *Malicroix*, with the accompanying statement that they are important texts for her. Ironically, however, far from relieving the readers of the anxiety of intertextual reading, this gesture brings its own pressures to bear on them to read the Giono and Bosco texts she refers to. In fact, the reader is free to choose whether to comply or not, but a direct address such as this from the author to the reader has a powerful effect.

In *Les Ports du silence*, Jaime’s situation has certain parallels with Bosco’s *Malicroix*: he has inherited Mérindole, a property in the Camargue, from his aunt, conditional upon him agreeing to celebrate ‘la messe des cents morceaux’ every year; in *Malicroix*, Mégremut inherits a property in the Camargue from his uncle and that
inheritance too has certain conditions attached to it. In *Les Ports du silence*, Jaime is much maligned for mixing up reading and reality, and indeed on meeting the *notaire*, Tournoure, he connects him with the character, Oncle Rat, from Bosco’s *Malicroix* (p.12). Nevertheless, Jaime is not naïve in this respect and he constantly reassesses his initial judgement: “‘Oncle Rat’ changeait déjà’ (p.13); ‘celui-ci, qui de l’oncle Rat n’avait plus que la taille’ (p.17); ‘on est loin de “l’oncle Rat”‘ (p.44), until, ultimately, circumstances force him to acknowledge the close associations between fiction and reality. Tournoure and Oncle Rat resemble each other after all; they are both ‘tout ruse’ (*Malicroix*, p.401). Ironically, however, Jaime does not carry the parallels between his situation and that of Bosco’s Mégremut any further. Baroche’s irony is that if he had done so, if he had read his own situation more thoroughly through his reading of *Malicroix*, he would have rightly been more suspicious of Tournoure. In *Malicroix*, the *notaire*, Maître Dromiols, is deeply implicated in plans to manoeuvre Mégremut out of his inheritance, and in Jaime’s case, Tournoure is similarly manipulative. The full impact of the author’s irony (at the expense of her readers) is (ironically) only apparent to readers who read – or who have read – Bosco’s *Malicroix.*

In a different way, both Baroche’s authorial presence and her authority are inscribed into *L’Hiver de beauté*, paradoxically, by means of that novel’s framing by its primary intertext, Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. From the outset, the reader is led (back) to the intertext as a point of reference by the extract from the last letter of Laclos’s novel which functions as a preface/epigraph to Baroche’s novel, and, in a more sustained way, by the ‘Postface’ where Baroche describes the genesis of *L’Hiver de beauté*. In *L’Hiver de beauté*, Baroche recuperates and (re)constructs Laclos’s Mme. de Merteuil as Isabelle, creating not only a future for her but also a past. The reader learns that Isabelle’s
father sold her to the Marquis de Merteuil. Her beauty commanded a high price, and the proceeds from this transaction provided the sizeable dowry required to marry off her plain sister, Madeleine. Armand-Marie and Isabelle had wished to marry but their wishes were sacrificed to financial concerns and instead Armand-Marie had to marry Madeleine. After reading about Isabelle’s past in *L’Hiver de beauté*, Laclos’s Mme. de Merteuil’s fidelity to her ‘principes’ in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (Letter 81, p.224) and her cold manipulation of other characters, can be seen in a different light. To read *L’Hiver de beauté* is thus to change the subsequent reading of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Baroche’s *L’Hiver de beauté* therefore challenges and subverts the authority of Laclos’s canonical text written nearly two hundred years earlier, sensitising the reader to the issues surrounding Laclos’s treatment of his character and to the socio-historical climate in which he was working and of which the character is a part. Baroche’s recuperation of Laclos’s character also reveals something of the antagonistic relationship between a writer and her precursors. Laclos’s novel is read and taught as an important French literary text; *L’Hiver de beauté* thus lays claim to Baroche’s own place in the literary canon, where, as a woman and a short-story writer, she previously came low on the hierarchical scale of qualifying values.

In *L’Hiver de beauté*, events and characters from *Les Liaisons dangereuses* are referred to within the text, authenticating Isabelle as the re-created Mme. de Merteuil (for example, pp.39;48;72;138), even to the extent of inscribing Laclos’s title: ‘(cinq années secrètes: qui peut savoir ce qu’elle réfugie entre ces murs? Tous croient à des liaisons dangereuses...’ (pp.44-45). This italicised reference reinforces Laclos’s text as the intertext but it also playfully emphasises the textness of Baroche’s own text. By referring within her novel to the title of another (real) novel on which her main character is based,
she is stressing the fiction of her fiction – and both playing with her readers and
eliciting their complicity by including them in her joke. Likewise in Les Ports du silence,
Jaime muses that he is not made for ‘les liaisons dangereuses’ (p.101). This bears out
Jaime’s predilection for mapping literary references onto observations about life but for
Baroche’s readers who know L’Hiver de beauté, this is another jokey authorial clin
d’œil.

Baroche’s employment of intertextual references acts as an inscription within the
text of her presence as author of that text and it also affirms the status of the text as
fiction. In an episode in L’Hiver de beauté, the character, Pauline, asks Queria: ‘La
Merteuil était vraiment votre aïeule? Enfin ..’ and Queria replies: ‘Son modèle, oui’
(p.153). This perplexing exchange forces Baroche’s readers to question the boundaries
between reality and fiction. In the ‘reality’ of Baroche’s novel, Queria is writing a
fictionalised life of her ancestor, Isabelle, the ex-Mme. de Merteuil. However, in reality
(in the reader’s reality, outside the fiction of L’Hiver de beauté), Mme. de Merteuil is a
fictional character, and le modèle of Baroche’s Isabelle. In L’Hiver de beauté, Pauline’s
reference to ‘La Merteuil’ must, therefore, be to the fictional Isabelle that Queria is
creating (within the fiction of Baroche’s novel). Queria’s reply makes (fictional) sense
only if she means that her ancestor is le modèle for the (fictional) Isabelle she is creating.
However, the oral register of this conversation makes it ambiguous enough to confuse
Baroche’s readers momentarily, especially considering earlier textual jokes of this sort.
At first it seems as though Queria says that La Merteuil is le modèle of her ancestor
(which is the case in reality outside the novel). Reality and fiction are blurred and the
reader is no longer certain what s/he is reading – reality, fiction, or a joke. To emphasise
textness (or the fiction of fiction) is thus paradoxically also to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality.*see addendum to endnotes

In the work under consideration, the texts themselves draw attention to their textness. Such self-consciousness reveals the (ant)agonism of the process of textuality. On the one hand, the reader is involved in the textual process but on the other, the inscription of authorial presence carries with it a certain concomitant authorial authority. The effects on the reader may be including and/or excluding, but the tension between these positions is creative, engaging the reader and encouraging (self-)interrogation. In Pour un Nouveau Roman, Robbe-Grillet states that an active reader demands to ‘participer à une création, d’inventer à son tour l’oeuvre – et le monde – et d’apprendre ainsi à inventer sa propre vie’ (p.169). This is never an easy process. Nevertheless, the blurring of boundaries between writing and reading, between writer and reader, between fiction and reality in the texts of Baroche and Cixous would seem to enable, to encourage and to direct readers towards such a project.

SUMMARY

The textual effects explored in this chapter attest to the complexity of the reading process. Reading is a negotiation and a dialogue in which the subjectivity of the reader interacts with the text. The reader constructed by the texts and by my interpretations is a figure necessary to this study; the individual reader’s responses may not necessarily follow those of the constructed reader but textual effects such as direct reader address, narrative confidences, uncertainty, and intertextual references, contribute to the construction of the individual reader as the reader of the text. All the texts, however, encourage active readings, and the active reader to some extent has the option of
becoming, to use Fetterley’s words, a resisting reader – of resisting the dominant reading position constructed by the text.

In terms of sexual identity, the inclusion or exclusion of a gendered reader is a factor of the transformative potential of texts but it can work in different ways. For all its women-centred aspects and its feminist inscription of different ways of being-a-woman, Baroche’s *L’Hiver de beauté* does not exclude male readers *per se*. Isabelle is a seductive character to both women and men, and the novel inscribes the femininity as well as the masculinity of its male characters in a sympathetic way, although individual readers (male or female) may not necessarily respond accordingly. Cixous’s women-centred fiction, of which *Ilia* is an example, constructs an exclusively female readership and, although there are possible reading positions for male readers, to a great extent they are specifically excluded. Cixous’s recent fiction, such as *L’Ange au secret*, is more openly addressed, however, and this reflects the changing concerns and content of her texts. The difference between the readership of these two writers (Baroche and Cixous) parallels the differing aspects of women’s identities which are inscribed in their work. In Baroche’s novels, women’s identities are primarily constituted and inscribed in socio-cultural terms; her texts portray different ways of being a woman and living relationships on a day-to-day basis. In Cixous’s women-centred fiction, women’s identities are primarily figured on a conceptual level as (utopian or unknown) possibilities and potentialities.

The metafictional nature of the texts under discussion has the effect of calling into question the boundaries between reality and fiction, and between writer, narrator and reader. On the one hand, the reader is thus led out from the text to interrogate social structures, language and ways of thinking and, on the other hand, within him/herself to an
interrogation of his/her own attitudes and identity. In this respect, as Cixous writes, the process of questioning itself is an important beginning:

Les questions sont des lampes sur nos chemins. Naître c’est avancer à la lumière des questions. Les bonnes réponses sont celles qui donnent le jour à de nouvelles questions. Tout dans le monde a commencé par de nouvelles questions. (*Ilia*, p.208)

Before anything can change, we need to ask questions. Texts which seduce us or provoke us into asking questions of ourselves, of others, of society, of language, of thought, are thus those which can show us the way towards change.

The active reader is also a creative reader, and in all the texts under discussion, the reader is engaged in the creative process. Multiple viewpoints, uncertainties and ambiguities have the effect of encouraging the reader to create meaning for the text – and for him/herself. Potentialities are seductive, opening up creative directions for the reader, offering inspiration and encouraging speculation. Our own identities may be called into question and this may be frightening, but the creative possibilities that reading offers enable us to fill that void with reassuring – or with exciting – potentialities.

The analysis of reading in terms of its power relations thus has a dual outcome: on the one hand, it reveals ways in which the reader is controlled and constructed by the text, but on the other hand, it also reveals ways in which the reader is touched by the text. To read is thus potentially to be touched, and the effect of touch on the reader can linger and grow in intensity. If the reader’s (self-)interrogation and creativity do not end with the end of the reading of the text, then it would seem that reading is not only a political but also a meaningful dialogue.\(^{59}\) Overwhelmingly, loss, both in life and in texts, touches us all and the next chapter therefore explores how far the interaction between the reader’s identity and the portrayal of loss in fiction might be construed as creative and transformative.
1 See Lynne Pearce, “I” the Reader: Text, Context and the Balance of Power, in Feminist Subjects, Multimedia: Cultural Methodologies, eds. Penny Florence and Dee Reynolds (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995): ‘Even as the text positions me, so may I (re)position my relationship to it’ (p.168). This essay is reprinted in Lynne Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading (London: Arnold, 1997), pp.41-50.

2 See, for example, Roland Barthes, Le Plaisir du texte (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), which celebrates the orgasmic pleasures of textual jouissance; and Hélène Cixous, ‘Difficult Joys’, where Cixous speaks of reading as making love (p.27).

3 See Ross Chambers, ‘Alter Ego: Intertextuality, Irony and the Politics of Reading’, in Intertextuality: Theories and Practices, eds. Michael Worton and Judith Stull, pp.143-58. Chambers suggests that in socially and literarily oppositional texts, the reader is ‘the object of an active seduction’ (p.145). See also Ross Chambers, Room for Maneuver for a more extended study of Chambers’ theorising of textual seduction and also for his particular definition of ‘oppositional’ as a covert practice which, although working against power systems, works within their structures and indeed is a function of them (p.56).


5 See, for example, Norman N. Holland, 5 Readers Reading. One of Holland’s four ‘principles of literary experience’ is the matching of fantasies. Readers create their own fantasies in relation to the textual material of their reading (p.117); see also Holland, pp.287-291, for reading as transformation of fantasies and wishes.


8 See, for example, Susan Brownmiller, Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).


10 In this connection, see Gill Rye, ‘Reading Identities with Kristeva and Cixous in Christiane Baroche’s L’Hiver de beauté’, which comes to the same conclusion but which explores the tension between individual and collective identity (in reading).

11 See Edith de Rham, Joseph Losey (London: Deutsch, 1991), for a number of other interpretations of the role of the valet in black in this film.

12 It is ironic because the phrase, ‘lézard d’or’, which puzzles and haunts Benoîte and which fuels her fascination with Losey’s film, is revealed at the end of ‘Le Lézard d’or’ to have been a mishearing of ‘Je les adore’ (p.90).


16 See Martine Motard-Noar, Les Fictions d’Hélène Cixous, pp.64-66, for a discussion of the name and figure of Illa in this text.

17 See Morag Shiach, Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing, p.93, for some examples.

18 Hélène Cixous, Vivre l’Orange/To Live the Orange (Paris: des femmes, 1979). Clarice Lispector is a Brazilian writer who died in 1977 and whose fiction is translated into French and published by des femmes.


20 Similarly, in Hélène Cixous, L’Ange au secret (Paris: des femmes, 1991), the writing subject stresses the importance of her literary guides ‘de sexe plutôt féminin’ (p.37), although, in fact she refers to male as well
as female writers. In this later text, Lispector is not such a central figure, although her name recurs like a leitmotiv in much of Cixous’s fiction after 1980.

21 See Jean Cohen, Structure du langage poétique (Paris: Flammarion, 1966); Cohen suggests that the use of proper names without specific referent in poetry may represent some absolute or essential figure which is impossible to express in prose (p.163). I would argue that in Cixous’s (poetical) fiction this technique has comparable implications, with the important difference that in her work it enables a figuring of the inexpressible as mobile, fluid and multiple.

22 The theoretical framework relating to subjectivity in reading on which the forthcoming discussion is based renders it difficult to speak in terms of ‘we’ (the readers). Different readers respond to texts in different ways. Nevertheless, my methodology and practice produces readings and a reader similar to Iser’s concept of the ‘implied reader’: see Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader. The term ‘reader’ is thus a construct (indeed a construct of the text itself and of my interpretation of it) and not a real reader (although real readers may read similarly to the implied reader). The readings designate ‘a network of response-inviting structures’ (Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading, p.34) which therefore enable a discussion of text/reader relations while retaining the notion of individual subjective readings. I am aware that this practice uses an interpretive framework to produce an interpretation of the text which is self-justifying (see Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? p.13): I am interrogating the relations between a text and its reader; I identify certain structures and effects which I suggest produce certain responses in the reader; I use my findings to comment on text/reader relations. The structures and effects are ‘themselves constituted by an interpretive act’ (Fish, p.13). I defend my practice (with Fish), however: while my own (necessarily subjective) reading is implicated in my readings, the interpretive framework I work within ultimately belongs to a community of textual interpretation. Furthermore, I produce interpretations which have no claims to special authority.


26 This point is taken up again and its implications discussed in relation to the possibility of an ethics of reading in Chapter 5, pp.237-45.

27 In this connection, see Christiane Baroche, ‘L'Abîme et après’, Roman, 18 (March 1987), pp.67-77. In this interview, Baroche’s response to a question about rhythm in L'Hiver de beauté would suggest that to her it is a technique designed to convey reality (p.75).

28 In this respect, in ‘L'Abîme et après’, Baroche explains that Queria is a paler character than Isabelle since she is like a writer who pales in significance before the characters s/he creates (p.76).

29 See Alicia Ostriker, The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking’, Signs, 8 (Autumn 1982), pp.68-90, for an account of the importance of revisionist mythmaking as a way of redefining both women’s identity and patriarchal culture.

30 In ‘L'Abîme et après’, Baroche admits her own seduction by Isabelle: ‘Et moi-même, je me suis fait dévorer par Isabelle, parce que je crois que son personnage est plus prémant, plus fort que celui de Queria’ (p.76). Isabelle is apparently also seductive to Baroche’s male readers because she retains her femininity (Christiane Baroche in conversation at Cerisy-la-Salle, August 1994); see Michael Worton, ‘Le Chant de la sirène: Les romans de Christiane Baroche’, Sud, 105 (1993), pp.73-85, for a discussion of Baroche’s women characters.

31 See Jacques Lovichi, ‘L'Hiver de beauté’, Sud, 17.73/74 (1987), pp.275-77, for a somewhat different interpretation. In this review, Lovichi judges Baroche’s male characters pale and ‘ternes et embryonnaires’ compared to Isabelle and Queria (p.276).

32 Personally, I found this a difficult episode to interpret since I had to contend with my own emotional resistance (as a feminist/woman) to the necessity of doubting Isabelle’s status as victim.

33 However, a further explanation can be found in Christiane Baroche, Le Boudou (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1991), a partly autobiographical text about the author’s loving relationship with her grandfather, in which the writing of Les Ports du silence is prefaced (p.121) and where Baroche describes such a love relationship as ‘le seul ame de ton océan d’acide’ (p.111).

34 In this connection, see Alain Robbe-Grillet, Pour un nouveau roman (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), for a useful distinction between realism and reality in fiction, pp.171-83.
is not an uncommon feature of modern fiction.  


Other less explicit examples of this type of self-intertextuality in Cixous’s fiction include a mention of ‘Promethea’ in Hélène Cixous, Limonade tout était si infini (Paris: des femmes, 1982), p.274, which prefigures Cixous’s next fictional text, Le Livre de Promethea (Paris: Gallimard, 1983); in Hélène Cixous, Jours de l’an (Paris: des femmes, 1990), the author sees the first traces of the following text (p.267) – and indeed traces of Deluge (Paris: des femmes, 1992) and Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu (Paris: des femmes, 1993) can be found.


See Morag Shiach, Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing, p.59, where the importance of this recognition is emphasised.

Le Livre de Promethea is in many ways a pivot text of Cixous’s oeuvre between the textual explorations of the self and the search for feminine subjectivity of the 1970s and early 1980s such as Hélène Cixous, Souffles (Paris: des femmes, 1975), La (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), and Angst (Paris: des femmes, 1977), and the move towards a concern with relationships with others in the texts of the late 1980s and 1990s, from Manne aux Mandelstams aux Mandelas (Paris: des femmes, 1988) to Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu (1993). Le Livre de Promethea is concerned with both these trajectories. In this connection see Chapter 4 for a reading of this text.

See Jean Cohen, Structure du langage poétique, for a discussion of the un-named je, which in poetry is often a personal pronoun without referent or context, and which can be understood to refer to the poet, as an image or as an absolute – or to the reader who thus participates in the text (p.158). Although Cohen’s work specifically relates to poetry since he assumes the narrative subject in a novel to be readily identifiable (p.157), his point would seem to be more widely applicable than he himself considers it to be. Cixous’s poetical fiction is perhaps an obvious case, but the un-named, and indeed uncertain or ambiguous, je is not an uncommon feature of modern fiction.

In a different way, Cixous’s bilingual text, Vivre l’Orange/To Live the Orange draws attention to the qualities of language(s) by means of the differences between the text in the two languages.

In this respect, Ilos and Cixous’s more recent fiction contrast somewhat with the greater syntactical disruption and textual fragmentation of her 1970s texts, particularly Souffles and La.

For contrasting responses to Cixous’s work see Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, and Verena Andermatt Conley, Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine. See also Margaret Whitford, ‘La Cosmogonie d’Hélène Cixous’, French Studies, 43 (1989), pp.232-33, where Whitford identifies the need for an interpreter who is both reader and critic to mediate Cixous’s work for a wider audience. Morag Shiach, Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Reading, would seem to go some way towards addressing this need.


This is also an explicit (and framing) concern in Cixous’s Le Livre de Promethea (see pp.15, 247).

See Martine Motard-Noar, Les Fictions d’Hélène Cixous, for a discussion of the uncertain nature of autobiography in Cixous’s work in which the rejection of the boundaries between fiction and reality are considered to create a new space, the ‘plus-que-présent’ (pp.146-47).

See Lynne Pearce, ‘Reading as Autobiography’, in Changing our Lives: Doing Women’s Studies, ed. Gabriele Griffin (London: Pluto, 1994), pp.159-68, for the term ‘reading autobiographies’. See Michael Riffaterre, ‘La Trace de l’inter texte’, where Riffaterre argues on the reader’s behalf that recognition of intertextual references is not necessary but the presupposition that they exist is. See also Martine Motard-Noar, Les Fictions d’Hélène Cixous, pp.125-52, for a discussion of the creative implications of Cixous’s use of intertextuality.


See Fyodor Dostoyevsky, ‘Stavrogin’s Confession’, in The Devils, pp.671-704 (p.687). This chapter is an Appendix to the novel but was omitted from the original version.

In this connection, see also Sarah Dunant, Transgressions (London: Virago, 1997), for a similar – and controversial – portrayal of a woman’s response to the threat of rape.
See, for example, Hélène Cixous, *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, ‘Difficult Joys’; ‘L’Auteur en vérité’.


33 See Michael Worton, *Michel Tournier: La Goutte d’or* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1992), p.77, for a similar point. Indeed, Worton’s observations in this text on reading Tournier’s work have informed much of this section.

See Henri Bosco, *Malicroix* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948). See also Hélène Cixous, *Ilia*, where Cixous confirms (or perhaps, lays claim to) the extent of the power of direct reader address when je is led to put her own identity into question in response to Lispector’s authorial address, tu (p.97).

34 Baroche herself, however, denies any intention of irony, maintaining that her gesture is simply generous (Private correspondence, August 1996).


36 See, however, Suzanne Lamy, *Quand je lis je m’invente*, for a positive example of a man’s reading of women’s writing (p.22). See Claire Duchen, ‘Angst’, *Modern Language Review*, 82, (1987), pp.214-15, where a more debatable attempt at the inclusion of male readers is highlighted: the back cover of the English translation of Cixous’s *Angst* suggests that male readers will derive the ‘greatest benefit’ from the text as it will ‘help them realise the power and fascination that lies deep in every woman’ (Hélène Cixous, *Angst*, trans. Jo Levy [London, Calder, 1985]). See also Neal Oxenhandler, ‘Le Troisième Corps’, *The French Review*, 45.5 (April 1972), pp.1041-42, which is indicative of a male critic’s exclusion from Cixous’s women-centred fiction; he appreciates the poetic richness of the writing but states that the erotic experience does not communicate aesthetically and that the reader cannot participate emotionally. He declares his subjective dislike of *nouveau roman* but omits to see that perhaps his masculine subjectivity may be what precludes his participation in Cixous’s feminine eroticism.

37 See Gill Rye, ‘Weaving the Reader into the Text: The Authority and Generosity of Modern Women Writers’, *Women in French Studies* (1997), pp.161 – 172; this article is largely based on the findings of this chapter.

*On the back cover of the first edition of *L’Hiver de beauté*, Queria is described as the descendant of the Marquise de Merteuil ‘ou celle d’un des modesles de la marquise’. Queria’s answer in the passage analysed here, ‘son modele, oui’, could thus quite plausibly also relate to a real-life person on whom Laclos’s character is based. This reading is, however, just as unsettling since the Isabelle-Mme. de Merteuil equation of Baroche’s novel is suddenly called into question. It is particularly interesting that the Folio edition, on which I have based my analysis in this chapter, omits to mention this alternative version of Queria’s ancestry on its back cover; this edition is indeed much more self-consciously fictional than the first, since it includes not only Baroche’s Postface but also a short story, ‘Une Rencontre improbable’ in which (the fictional) Isabelle (de Merteuil) meets the (real) historical figure, Casanova (pp.327-39).
3. READING (ABOUT) LOSS:
REMEMBERING LOSING IN ORDER TO CREATE (ONE'S SELF)

In *Soleil noir: Dépression et mélancolie*, Julia Kristeva makes the connection between loss and artistic creation. Loss is an intrinsic part of our lives, from primary biological and psychological loss – separation from the mother – to the trauma of the (real) death of a parent or other loved one. In psychoanalytical terms, dealing with primary loss is a necessary part of becoming an independent, stable individual; the lost loved object must be eroticised and found again – or transposed – as an erotic object, or it must be sublimated in cultural constructions like intellectual and artistic production. Creating a work of art, including that of literature, can, therefore, be an important part of the process of dealing with loss, and of the formation or the survival of the self.¹

Kristeva acknowledges, in *Soleil Noir*, the infant’s feelings of both love and hate for the primary object (p.20), and this is a fundamental element in the work of psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein.² From the earliest days, the infant experiences both the satisfaction and frustration of his/her desires, and the reality of these experiences continually interacts with and modifies internal phantasies of idealisation. Likewise, the phantasy world interacts with and modifies the infant’s experience of reality.³ When a whole object (the mother) is recognised, as opposed to the previously experienced part objects (the breast, face, hands), in an aspect of development which Klein terms ‘the depressive position’, the infant recognises his/her own dependence on the mother who is the source of both good and bad experiences.⁴ The infant’s feelings of love and hate for the mother are experienced as a conflict, and, for Klein, it is conflict, and the need to
overcome it, which is ‘a fundamental element in creativeness’.\textsuperscript{5} Klein links creativity with deep infantile anxieties. Destructive impulses are directed towards the (bad, hated) mother, but this situation gives rise to anxiety and guilt: the (good, loved) mother may be damaged or destroyed (lost). Alongside, and in response to, these destructive impulses, Klein identifies reparative (creative) impulses, which enable the infant to rebuild internal phantasies of the loved object, to repair the damage s/he feels s/he has inflicted. This ongoing conflict gradually enables the infant to separate psychologically from the mother and to become an independent individual.

In ‘Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse’, Klein, analysing the case of painter Ruth Kjær, specifically connects the artist’s creation with the work of reparation, with the desire ‘to make good the injury psychologically done to the mother and also to restore herself’ (p.218). Similarly, Klein’s psychoanalytic work with children finds that drawing and painting are often used as a way of restoring people.\textsuperscript{6}

In \textit{Love, Guilt and Reparation}, Klein suggests that primary conflicts are present throughout life in our relations with other people, that the same anxieties become ‘an inherent part of love’ (p.311), and that the way we work through them in the infantile depressive position influences all the relationships we have in later life. Furthermore, she suggests that when we lose loved ones in reality, the process of mourning is similar to the childhood depressive position; in fact it re-awakens it and re-enacts the process of dealing with the loss of our primary internalised, idealised love object. Indeed, Klein maintains that, in adulthood, we are unable to mourn the loss of our loved ones effectively unless we have established a secure internal world in the infantile depressive position. Effective
mourning is a creative, reparative process: that of re-experiencing the loss, and that of rebuilding, and enriching, the inner world – of strengthening the self.\(^7\)

While Klein and Kristeva connect artistic creativity with the psychological processes of primary loss, Hélène Cixous focuses on the creative potential of the realities of (conscious) personal loss as well as on the political and philosophical connections between identity and creativity. In *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, she identifies three areas important to the process of writing: death, dreams and our inner (libidinal and imaginary) world.\(^8\) In the first lecture in this collection, ‘The School of the Dead’, she suggests that in order to write, indeed in order to live, we need to experience death:

> So it gives us everything, it gives us the end of the world; to be human we need to experience the end of the world. We need to lose the world, to lose a world, and to discover that there is more than one world and that the world isn’t what we think it is. Without that, we know nothing about the mortality and immortality we carry. We don’t know we’re alive as long as we haven’t encountered death [...] Of course, I’m only talking about the death of the loved one, it’s only a question of love here. And of everything loss brings as it takes away. We lose and in losing we win. (p.10)

The death of a loved one confronts us not only with the loss of that person, but also with death itself, and our own mortality. Death – including our own death – is part of life, and, Cixous argues, we need to experience the pain of loss, in order to understand what life is. In losing the loved person, we also gain: we learn what it is to be human.

Furthermore, loss may give us the gift of creation. In fiction texts, such as *Dedans* and *Jours de l’an*, as well as in her essays, Cixous relates her own ‘coming to writing’ to the death of her father.\(^9\) Indeed, the death of a loved one may be the stuff of writing, but this does not necessarily mean that the loss is represented in the literary creation. For Paule Constant, for example: ‘C’est bien dans l’absence, la mort, la perte, que se trouve le nerf de la littérature, celui qui provoque la pulsion d’écrire, qui nourrit le texte, qui
fabrique l’écrivain’. Like Cixous, Constant considers that the writer is formed by
loss, that the writer is created, comes into being as a writer, through the experience of
loss. Writing, therefore, can be part of the process of surviving loss – and of living again
– yet also, as Cixous states in ‘De la Scène de l’Inconscient’, of accepting and
remembering loss: ‘C’est là à nouveau que l’écriture est bien nécessaire. Il faut ne pas
oublier. L’écriture ce n’est au fond qu’un anti-oubli. On a intérêt à écrire pour à la fois
sentir passer et ne pas oublier qu’il y a aussi l’enfer’ (p.22). Here writing would seem to
be part of the mourning process, which is not to forget the loved one nor to forget their
loss, but to remember them, and in creating anew to remember that loss and pain are part
of life itself. In an interview in 1994, Kristeva acknowledges the part played by the pain
of mourning her father in the writing of her novel, Le Vieil Homme et les loups, and
Christian Baroche, in her apparently autobiographical Le Boudou, avows her desire to
create something new in the wake of writing about the deaths of her beloved grandfather
and mother: ‘Je me sens rouée de coups, et pour la première fois depuis longtemps,
assurée de pouvoir passer à autre chose, de libérer mon coeur et ma plume, en un autre
roman par exemple’ (p.121). Baroche’s Le Boudou is apparently autobiographical
because, as Jacques Lovichi points out in his review, it is ‘inclassable’ – even though he
classifies it as a ‘roman’. Le Boudou appears to be an autobiographical narrative but the
personal pain it reveals is offset by the fantastic nature of the short story which appears at
the end of the text. Moreover, in addition to including in the book the short story, ‘Rêve
de jungles...’, Baroche also prefigures the writing of her next novel, Les Ports du
silence.11

Artistic and literary creation is connected with personal loss – of loved ones, of the
self – but personal loss can also be part of a collective loss, caused by, for example, a
tragedy, like war. Of prime importance in Cixous’s work is the connection she makes between writing and the self on both personal and collective fronts. Feminism has drawn attention to the negativity implicit in the perception of women’s identity in patriarchal cultures: from Beauvoir’s ‘Il est le Sujet, il est l’Absolu: elle est l’Autre’ (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, p.15), via Millett’s critique in *Sexual Politics* of Freud’s definition of women in terms of ‘lack’ (of the penis) and Irigaray’s attack in *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un* on Lacan for his non-existent ‘Woman’, to Cixous’s own questioning of the place of ‘woman’ in the binary structure of Western thought: ‘Où est-elle?’ (‘Sorties’, p.115). For Cixous, women have historically been ‘décapité[e]s’ (‘Le Sexe ou la tête?’, p.6), ‘retenue[s]’ (‘La Venue à l’écriture’, p.50), and unheard in Western culture (‘Sorties’, p.171). Writing, for women, is a way ‘out of this negation of their own voice’, a way of freeing themselves from this cultural death.\(^{12}\) In Cixous’s texts, this is not seen as a sublimation of that loss in artistic creation but as a celebration of life: writing *is* living, writing is loving, exploring and creating the self – and women – differently (‘La Venue’, pp.52-53).

In different ways, therefore, loss is connected with artistic creation: for Kristeva, in psychoanalytical terms, as a sublimation of the lost primary object of love, or, from her personal experience, as a part of the mourning process; for Klein, as reparation, a restoration of the lost loved object, and a strengthening of the self; for Cixous, Constant and Baroche, loss nourishes literature and creates the writer; and also, for Cixous, it necessitates an affirmation, a celebration of life and of the self in both personal and political terms. Although these conscious and unconscious connections do not mean that loss is necessarily portrayed as such in the literary or artistic work, the figuring of loss *is* a link between some of the fictional texts of Baroche, Cixous and Constant. The
connection between the loss represented in the text and the loss which may or may not
be a part of the writer’s own experience is not, however, the subject of enquiry here: it is
the reader and the reading of loss which are of interest. This chapter will, therefore,
explore the effects of reading (about) loss – what it can mean to the reader to read (about)
loss – and it will consider ways in which the reader may respond to these texts. In the
work of these three writers, loss appears in very different guises, and they will be
considered separately.

PAULE CONSTANT

Most of Constant’s novels feature little girls (Tiffany in Ouregano, Emilie-
Gabrielle in Le Grand Ghâpal, and Chrétienne in La Fille du Gobernator). Their story is
taken up when they are seven years old and the text follows them through part of their
childhood and, in the case of Tiffany, on through adolescence to adulthood in the
subsequent novels, Propriété privée and Balta. A common factor in all these texts is the
portrayal of the girls’ gradual slide towards a loss of self, to what is described on the back
cover of La Fille du Gobernator as ‘une longue descente aux Enfers’; this loss of self will
be examined with specific reference to the characters, Tiffany and Chrétienne. These two
little girls have much in common. At the age of seven, they are both taken by their
parents to live abroad when their fathers take up colonial appointments – Tiffany to
Africa, Chrétienne to South America. For both little girls, the experience is alienating and
frightening, and it has a devastating effect on them.

Both Tiffany and Chrétienne are rejected, excluded and ignored by their parents,
who are preoccupied with their colonial roles and environment. There is no place there
for the little girls. In Ouregano, Tiffany is always in the way. She is always ‘LA’, and
‘LA était moins une donnée géographique qu’une entité chronologique’ (p.81); being in the way means being anywhere where her mother is – or is likely to be. Similarly, in La Fille du Gobernator, Chrétienne is abandoned by her parents, who devolve responsibility for her daily care and her education to the band of convicts who act as domestic servants. Chrétienne must find space for her lessons amid the kitchen chaos of disembowelled chickens and dying fish, between the convict’s drunkenness and masturbating.

Fear plays a large part in the girls’ experiences. In Ouregano, Tiffany is initially frightened of the lepers from the nearby leper camp and by the ordeal of school where she is faced with work she cannot understand or cope with. In La Fille du Gobernator, the convicts’ stories of violence haunt Chrétienne’s imagination.

In Ouregano, Tiffany experiences her time in Africa as an absence – it is as if she ceases to exist. Moreover, absence and silence are demanded of her. ‘PAS D’HISTOIRES’ is a leitmotiv which runs through Ouregano: ‘Faire des histoires, c’était finalement se mettre en travers de la vie des parents. Faire des histoires, c’était exister, aimer et détester, prendre plaisir ou avoir peur, le manifeste devant les adultes’ (p.99).

Her presence is unwanted, and she is not even allowed to express her feelings. Similarly, in the novel, Propriété privée, in which Tiffany is sent back to France to attend a convent school, she is not allowed to express her feelings of unhappiness. Her teacher speaks for her, saying she is settling down well (when she is not) and, moreover, she vets Tiffany’s letters to her grandparents in which the latter expresses her desire to leave, forcing her to re-write them and correct her ‘fautes de coeur’ – her simply unhappy feelings (p.122).

For both Tiffany and Chrétienne, there is a wide gulf between their needs and how these are met. In Propriété privée, for example, Tiffany’s mother silences her and
effectively disowns her, refusing her permission to call her ‘maman’ (pp.232-33), but the
gulf between her needs and how these are met is never starker than on the occasion of
the death of her beloved grandmother. When the latter is taken into hospital during the
school holidays, Tiffany returns to the convent, seeking comfort and familiarity.
However, when her grandmother dies, no one tells Tiffany; she is simply taken to
Requiem Mass and left to make the connection for herself. Likewise, in *La Fille du
Gobernator*, Chrétienne’s father persistently denies his daughter any subjectivity,
referring to her only as ‘ELLE’, always addressing her through her mother: ‘– Qu’est-ce qu’ELLE a?’ (p.34), ‘– Qu’est-ce qu’ELLE veut?’ (p.107), and demanding her silence
‘faites-la taire’ (p.49).

The reaction of both girls to their painful experiences includes anger and
aggression. In *Propriété privée*, Tiffany physically attacks the teacher who makes her life a misery, and in *La Fille du Gobernator*, Chrétienne tramples all over the flowers in the garden, squashes spiders, and violently snatches a good behaviour medal from another girl during her brief attendance at school. However, this behaviour also betrays a desire for attention and a need to belong. In *Propriété privée*, Tiffany plays at friendships in the absence of real ones, and in *La Fille du Gobernator*, Chrétienne steals drugs for the convicts, begs, and draws attention to herself by acting out religious trances in the street. However, for both girls, their experiences are so painful and traumatic, that eventually they are engulfed by grief, losing all sense of self and capacity to feel, to such an extent that their adult lives are marked. The adult Tiffany in Constant’s novel, *Balta*, is unhappy and disconnected both from herself and others, and the narrative of *La Fille du Gobernator* makes it clear that Chrétienne will never leave her painful childhood memories behind (p.155).
In none of Constant's 'Tiffany' novels, and only rarely in *La Fille du Gobernator*, are Tiffany's or Chrétienne's feelings conveyed by direct dialogue. Their thoughts and words are contained within the narration, which, therefore, mediates their experiences and their suffering. Paradoxically, however, rather than simply reading about them, the reader becomes party to their feelings, their anxiety, fear and grief. For example, in *La Fille du Gobernator*, when Chrétienne is locked in a store-room with the jars of preserved human heads which have been presented to her father, she is paralysed with fear by 'une onde glacée' (p.54); in *Ouregano*, Tiffany's experiences of school-life are a nightmare: ‘la terreur grognait dans le ventre de Tiffany, son coeur aboyait [...] La peur lui tapait dans la tête et lui courait dans les genoux qui commençaient seulement à trembler’ (p.158). In these two instances, physical descriptions of the girls’ psychological state convey in a concrete way the effect of their experiences on them; this effect is frequently reinforced by the rhythm of the text, by means of the punctuation. Furthermore, as Francine de Martinoir points out, the destruction of Tiffany, ‘le viol d'une âme’, is accompanied by other images of destruction and loss: for example, in *Ouregano*, Elise's miscarriage, the killing of an ox, the murder of N'Diop, and Beretti's sexual objectification of the passively complicit fourteen-year old Marie-Rosalie, ‘une femme sans tête’, ‘l'intérieur d'une jupe’ ‘un sexe’(p.189); in *Propriété privée*, the dissection of guinea pigs, the uprooting of the tree, the killing of farm animals. Similarly, in *Le Grand Ghâpal*, Chrétienne’s suffering resonates in her own destructive behaviour, the violence she witnesses, and the stories she hears. Echoing images of violence, loss and pain intensify the overall reading effect. The reader is not allowed to lose touch with the anguish of the little girls.
In the same article Martinoir suggests that the ‘Tiffany’ narratives, ‘consacrées au meurtre d’un enfant’ are therefore violent themselves, although the effect is transfigured by Tiffany’s voice within the narrative (p.117). In this connection, Martinoir mentions that Tiffany’s misspelling of her mother’s name is inscribed in the narrative. Indeed, in Ouregano and Propriété privée, the name Matilde is spelt with no ‘h’. At the very end of Propriété privée, Tiffany is writing her mother’s name on removal boxes: ‘Elle voulait que Tiffany marque Matilde Murano et non Madame Murano. Tu ne mets pas d’h à Matilde? Il en fallait un? Bien sûr, pourquoi Matilde sans h? Tiffany ne savait pas’ (p.246). Throughout Ouregano and Propriété privée, the reader has read the name Matilde as Tiffany hears it, with no ‘h’. In this way, the reader, positioned close to Tiffany, shares her experience.

Moreover, in both the Tiffany novels and La Fille du Gobernator, techniques, such as the use of capital letters and different narrative perspectives and tones, position and, to a large extent, determine the reader’s response to the text. For example, La Fille du Gobernator’s ‘ELLE’ and Ouregano’s ‘PAS D’HISTOIRES’ position the reader close to Chrétienne and Tiffany respectively. Capitalisation, in these instances, a stark contrast to the main narrative, is a technique which conveys the speaker’s tone of voice: the words are shouted. The reader can feel the weight of their effect on the characters. In La Fille du Gobernator, Chrétienne is punished by her father for her abandonment of a dying puppy and forced to shoot the half-dead, half ant-eaten animal herself to finish it off, ‘car l’abandon d’un animal est un crime’ (p.153). This episode is juxtaposed with Chrétienne’s own panic and despair at her mother’s absence, which the narration explains is permanent: ‘...la Mère de Dieu était partie pour toujours. Elle l’avait définitivement abandonnée’ (p.155). Whatever we think of Chrétienne’s abandonment of the puppy, the
use of the same vocabulary to describe her mother’s departure is controlling: the reader is led to compare their behaviour. If, in the view of Le Gobernator, it is a crime to abandon an animal, it must also surely be one to abandon a child.

The narration describes the anxieties and fears of Tiffany and Chrétienne, but, in various ways, for example, with images, rhythm, narrative tone, reader positioning, it also enables the reader to feel their suffering. To read Constant’s novels is to read about Tiffany’s and Chrétienne’s tragic passage towards a loss of self, but it is also to partake of a more intense experience, one that positions the reader close to the characters, close to their feelings, and close to their loss. This positioning is likely to elicit the reader’s sympathy for the little girls, even if it does not determine identification. As discussed in Chapter 2, reader identification is a complex matter, and depends to a great extent on resonances between the text and the reader’s subjectivity.

In this light, I shall consider the effects of reading (about) loss in these texts from three different axes: Colonialism, Childhood, and Women.

**Colonialism**

The three ‘Tiffany’ novels each stand on their own, but in all of them Tiffany’s story is enmeshed with colonialism and post-colonialism. Even in Propriété privée, which is set in France, Tiffany’s plight cannot be disassociated from the colonial system: she has been sent to boarding school in France while her parents are in Africa. However, although the novels can be read as a critique of the colonial social order, there is another dimension to reading (about) Tiffany’s loss.\(^\text{17}\)

In Ouregano and Balta, the borders between black and white Africa are constantly evoked in terms of gaps: in Balta, textually by means of the alternation of the narrative
between African and European scenes, and also between illusions and reality, between cultures, languages, and even between the border-post of the country Balta leaves and ‘la vraie frontière’ of the one he wishes to enter (p.30). In *Ouregano*, the few meeting points between black and white simply serve to stress the divide: for example, N’Diop, the French educated African doctor is rejected by black and white groups alike; the deputation of lepers, who come to the Murano’s house to ask for better food, are beaten by police; and the character, Beretti, unacceptable socially to the European community, is indispensable to its dealings with Africa.

In ‘Laye versus Constant’, Patricia Duffy stresses Tiffany’s empathy with ‘Africa’ through her relations with its nature, animals and people (p.73). In *Ouregano*, Tiffany meets the African people with understanding and respect: once she can see that the lepers are only hungry and not threatening her, she ceases to be afraid of them and regularly gives a woman food (p.164); she accepts African eating habits and traditions without judgement (pp.85-86). In this sense, Tiffany is excess to the colonial system: she has taken Beretti’s symbolic four steps: ‘toute l’étendue qui séparait la France de l’Afrique, l’impossible contact entre les Noirs et les Blancs, l’irrémissible rupture entre les adultes et les enfants’ (p.237); she has crossed the borders between black and white Africa. Tiffany’s marginality, her alienation, her enforced distance from the adult world in *Ouregano* means she is also distanced from the colonial attitudes which structure it.

In this context, Tiffany’s exclusion, silencing and invisibility vis-à-vis French colonial society, and indeed her loss of self, can be read as a metaphor for the condition of Africans in colonial Africa, without, it must be stressed, idealising or sanitising black Africa, or indeed unifying it. The association between Tiffany’s alienation and that of Africa under colonialism is reinforced textually by the resonances between Tiffany’s
suffering and the other images of violence and separation. In this reading, Tiffany's pain, anxieties, fears and suffering can perhaps put us in touch with (something of) the experiences of the colonised, or even, as is implied on the back cover of *Ouregano*, where she is described as ‘l’enfant-médium’ of ‘la détresse des adultes’, of the colonisers. Although the danger of a reductive reading is constantly present in these circumstances, the post-colonial setting of *Balta* would seem to resist this somewhat.  

*Balta* complements *Ouregano* in this respect, highlighting differences that exist both between Africans and among the French co-opérants as much as the differences that exist between African and European.  

In *La Fille du Gobernator*, colonial criticism takes a different form. In this novel, it is Chrétienne’s parents’ desire for personal sainteté which is at the root of their treatment of her. The narrative foregrounds comment on the hypocrisy and misguidedness of their mission, textually, for example, by the use of capital letters to express religious and moral discourse ironically (see pp. 33, 63), and also, humorously, by the narrative slip which turns the inappropriately named convict, Saint-Jean, (back) into John l’Enfer (p. 117). Moreover, in Chrétienne’s search for love, care and attention, it is Dédé, the convict who boasts of his two life sentences but who cares for Chrétienne when she is seriously ill, who is the most ‘Christian’ of all. Although ideological (religious and colonial) aspects are present in this text, *La Fille du Gobernator* lends itself more readily to a reading from the perspective of childhood.  

**Childhood**  

Far from being the best days of their lives, Chrétienne’s and Tiffany’s childhood is close to a living hell. In childhood, emotions and sensations are experienced intensely,
and Constant’s narrative techniques put the reader in touch with that intensity. In *La Fille du Gobernator*, for example, Chrétienne’s obsession with the Chinese murderer, Tang, is such because she makes connections between her father’s evocation of a ‘Chinois anonyme’ as an emblem of humanity (p.21), ‘la jaune [tête] aux yeux plissés’ preserved in the jar of human heads (p.54), the guillotine that the convict, Planchon, shows her, and the story of Tang’s birth to a seven-year old girl, his life and crimes. The impressions register deeply in Chrétienne’s imagination and the figure of Tang recurs throughout the text of *La Fille du Gobernator* as a leitmotiv.

Childhood is a time of learning, of initiation into the experience of the world, and it is a time for learning how to deal with fear and loss. In *La Fille du Gobernator*, after talking to Planchon about the preserved heads, Chrétienne is able to overcome her initial fear and examine them more closely on the occasion of her second encounter. In *Ouregano*, Tiffany is generally able to love and lose the wild animals she keeps as ‘pets’, but, in an episode which resonates with that of Chrétienne’s abandoned puppy, she is unable to kill in order to put an end to the suffering of her little injured ‘Bête’ (p.97). The loss of this ‘bête’ leaves a deep impression on her, and indeed, is still a painful memory in *Propriété privée*: ‘une toute petite bête, une minuscule bête, lui rongeait le coeur’ (p.23). However, at the end of this novel, she buries her vulnerability in this respect once and for all, by being the one to finish off the guinea pigs, which are being dissected in a biology lesson, but which are not dead. She cuts straight into the hearts – and ‘la bête ne reviendrait plus’ (p.221). In *La Fille du Gobernator*, Chrétienne, however, is unable to deal with the pain of loss, losing her self, and almost her life, in the face of total abandonment by parents who never loved her.
Whether or not we identify in any way with Constant’s characters, Chrétienne or Tiffany, and whatever we may think of their parents’ treatment of them, to read (about) their pain and their loss is to be able to understand, and perhaps to remember, how intensely children feel.

**Women**

Tiffany and Chrétienne are children, but specifically they are little girls, and more particularly, little girls who do not conform to traditional feminine stereotypes. In *Ouregano*, Tiffany, with her ‘nattes ébouriffées’, her ‘ongles rongés’, her ‘robe Carabi froissée’, her ‘sourcils épais’, her ‘nez rond’ and her ‘pieds poudreux’ is far removed from the fragile and decorative connotations of the name her mother gives her. In *La Fille du Gobernator*, Chrétienne’s father bemoans her lack of femininity:

– Est-ce qu’il faut absolument, avec ELLE que ce soit toujours le pire, qu’ELLE ne soit fascinée que par les monstres, qu’ELLE ne fasse aucune différence entre le beau et le laid, qu’ELLE ne s’intéresse jamais aux fleurs, aux oiseaux. A son âge, mes soeurs jouaient à la poupée. (p.48)

He cannot understand Chrétienne’s liking for toads, and judges her interests as abnormal against traditional, acceptable (and thus, in his opinion, normal) feminine pursuits.

Although both male and female readers may be touched in various ways by reading (about) Tiffany’s and Chrétienne’s loss of self, and although male and female readers alike may be able to identify with the intensity of childhood experiences, the effect of reading (about) the girls’ suffering in these texts may have particular resonances for Constant’s women readers. In their book, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development*, Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan present the findings of their lengthy collaborative project, a study of the process of listening to the
voices of girls between the ages of seven and eighteen. Their earlier work on
listening to women’s voices reveals that women generally experience their lives in a
more relational way than men, but that women commonly experience disconnections,
from others and from themselves, which lead to psychological crises. There is a double­
bind here for women: relationships are highly important, but in entering them or keeping
them, women are pressured to become selfless and voiceless, to silence the ‘I’. Brown
and Gilligan’s study, Meeting at the Crossroads, is an attempt to understand the
processes of these disconnections by listening. Their relational method of listening to
girls’ voices allows the polyphony and complexity of utterances to be heard, those of the
story, of the self, and of relations (pp.21-31).

Listening to girls over a period of years, the analysts recognise a strength in the
youngest girls, an acceptance of anger and conflict in relationships, and a willingness to
make their voices heard, to force others to listen to them. However, by the age of eleven,
the girls are already beginning to experience the helplessness of not being listened to, to
disconnect from their strong selves, to become what others want them to be in
relationships, and to experience confusion between real and pretend feelings (p.105).

One of the most striking findings of this project, however, is the effect that
listening to the girls’ voices has on the women analysts. The women recognise in the
girls’ voices their own earlier struggles to stay in connection with themselves but which
they had forgotten, or repressed (p.4). By remembering and recovering not only the
disconnections but also the strong voices of childhood, they are thus better able to
understand their later feelings of loss and confusion. Furthermore, from listening to the
girls’ voices, the women heard that ‘it was the adult women in their lives that provided
the models for silencing themselves and behaving like “good little girls”’ (p.221). The
women analysts were faced with the role that women themselves play in the silencing of other women.

From their experiences of this study, Brown and Gilligan stress the importance of ‘resonant relationships’ between girls and women (p.7). They argue that such relationships are necessary to the psychological development of girls, to allow girls’ voices to be expressed and heard, and they also argue that women themselves benefit psychologically from these relationships by understanding their disconnections and by recovering contact with their lost voices and lost strengths. They do not underestimate the difficulty of such relationships, however, which need to be authentic but which also need to provide the fantasies necessary to psychological development; nor do they underestimate the difficulty of reconciling the need to conform in order to live in contemporary society with the need to assert one’s own identity. Nevertheless, they consider that these resonant relationships have an important political as well as psychological potential. As a way of exploring and perhaps changing women’s development and as a way of ‘bringing women’s voices fully into the world’ (p.7), they may be part of, and contribute to, the process of political change (p.232).

In Constant’s novels, there is no ‘je’. However, although, neither Tiffany nor Chrétienne (can) say ‘I’, reading the texts may be a similar experience to hearing the girls’ voices in Brown and Gilligan’s terms. Tiffany and Chrétienne are at times wilful, angry, aggressive and destructive, asserting their own identity in a way that is unacceptable to their parents and to the society in which they live. They are both silenced, and they both lose touch with their sense of self. In Propriété privée, Tiffany is not listened to, she plays at relationships, and, following her grandmother’s death, she almost succumbs to the temptation of losing her individual identity completely and
becoming a nun: ‘de ne plus jamais faire surface, de rester avec les Dames Sanguinaires, Dame parmi les Dames’ (p.209). As an adult, in Balta, she is disconnected from others, from her self and from her childhood, until at the very end of the novel when circumstances lead her to comfort the dying African boy, Balta. This gesture puts Tiffany – and the reader – back in touch with her childhood in a very tangible way. Balta is the son of her African friend in Ouregano and the book he is carrying was once her own. The last words of Balta are those that Tiffany reads inscribed on the flyleaf of Balta’s book: ‘Tiffany Murano, Ouregano’ (p.258).

Whether this reconnection to her childhood has a beneficial psychological effect on Tiffany is left to the reader to speculate upon. However, Brown and Gilligan’s work suggests that it might. In Meeting at the Crossroads, the American psychologists make reference to Emily Hancock’s The Girl Within: A Radical New Approach to Female Identity, although they maintain some distance from it (p.224). According to Hancock, ‘the girl within’ is the ‘self-possessed’ eight-to-ten-year old girl that the woman once was, similar to the strong self that Brown and Gilligan identify in the young girls they interview. In The Girl Within, Hancock argues that remembering (and recovering) ‘the girl within’ enables women to find again their own authentic self-identity. Hancock’s argument is compelling and empowering, although the stress on a ‘distinct and vital self’ (p.3), ‘the spirited, playful, self-contained child, the independent, competent, purposeful girl that a woman carries with her in memory, a touchstone for the woman she can become’ (p.39) seems somewhat utopian if not simplistic. Idealisation – and perhaps illusion (or fiction) – certainly has its own part to play in the scenario Hancock describes, but her ‘girl within’ argues for a ‘wholeness of self’ (p.8) which seems rhapsodic rather than realistic.
Nevertheless, the positive value of the reconnection which Hancock describes is to some extent borne out by Brown and Gilligan's study in *Meeting at the Crossroads*, but their formulation of the process is somewhat different. They stress that, although young girls' voices do reveal a strength which is later lost, they also reveal the pain of being silenced and feelings of powerlessness. They maintain therefore that 'the girl within' is more complex than Hancock would suggest and the task of recovering her more difficult. Indeed, given this complexity, it might be more appropriate to conceptualise 'the girl within' as 'a girl within'. To reconnect with, or recover, a strong part of one's self rather than Hancock's 'wholeness of self' may actually be closer to the positive effects that Brown and Gilligan's women analysts experience in their relationships with girls.

In respect of Constant's novels, therefore, perhaps for a woman reader to read (about) the little girls' suffering is in a sense to listen to their voices and to recognise their strengths as well as their disconnections. It is certainly to recognise the role of women in bringing about those disconnections, but perhaps it may also enable a woman reader to understand, as did Brown and Gilligan's analysts, something of her own disconnections and to try to follow the difficult path of getting back in touch with 'a girl within'.

Reading (about) loss in Constant's novels must necessarily mean different things to different readers. However, narrative techniques bring the reader close to the girls' experiences, and as such, encourage an understanding and a sense of their loss. For women readers in particular, the effect may be one of recovering (rediscovering) their own loss. Although reading cannot be the resonant relationship between girls and women that Brown and Gilligan propose, it may be a cathartic one, and although the experience may be painful, and although we cannot recover what has been lost – since we are
changed by the loss – reading may still have a role to play in the (re-)creation of a stronger and more assertive self.

HELENE CIXOUS

Much of Cixous’s fiction takes the form of an assiduous exploration of feelings of loss within the self: from *Dedans* and the death of the father, through many texts of the 1970s such as *Angst*, which is concerned with women’s identity, to more recent texts which feature experiences of loss as an essential part of loving relationships (for example, *Mamme, Déluge* and *Beethoven à jamais*). In these later texts, loss is experienced because of death, separation or rejection, and, moreover, loss (and the fear of loss) is experienced as death; loss is, in Mireille Calle-Gruber’s words, ‘les mille morts vécues au présent’ (*Photos de racines*, p.43). In this section, Cixous’s *Déluge* provides the focus for discussion of the effects of reading (about) such an experience.

The first, and indeed the principal, motif of *Déluge* is *l’entredeux*. *L’entredeux* is the space between, the time between, the state between, and in *Déluge* it takes the form of *le deuil* in all its senses: the loss itself, grief, and the process of mourning. *L’entredeux* in *Déluge* is the space, the time, the state, *le vide* ‘entre avant et après’ (p.25), from the moment of loss until the point when loss becomes a memory. In one sense, *Déluge* is about loss – an exploration of loss, grief and mourning – but it is also a textual *mise en scène* of the pain of loss and the process of grieving, complete with theatrical metaphors, references and even stage directions (see pp.18,39,72).

*Déluge* is not concerned so much with loss through death (the death of a loved one) as with loss as death. Loss is experienced as ‘la maladie mortelle’ (p.183), ‘un assassinat’ (p.32), ‘le désert’ (p.74), ‘la mort’ (p.96), ‘l’insupportable’ (p.112), ‘un trou noir’ and ‘un
gouffre' (p.168). Indeed, the particular loss which figures in *Déluge*, the loss of a loved one, a lover (David), who ends his relationship with Ascension, brings with it a sense of loss of self: 'sans moi sans ici, sans intérieur' (p.24). Pain takes over. Nevertheless, loss is considered to be a necessary part of life: 'je vis de vivre et mourir' (p.16). Losing brings an intensity to living, and it is the exploration of this experience that is the subject of *Déluge*.

Multiple narrative levels bring about the slippage between *le récit* and *l'histoire*, between the story which is being told and the story itself (the experience). The narration oscillates between je, Clarice (an author, as elle and je), and Ascension (as elle and je). Ascension is brought into being as a named figure for the one (and the self) who has lost, since it is too painful for je to speak of the loss in the first person (pp.30-31); moreover, the theologically ludic name, Ascension, thus prefigures her survival of this 'death'. Some passages are headed 'Clarice:', 'Ascension:', 'Moi:', but it is not always clear who is speaking. The narrative slides between characters and the self, although, as always in Cixous's fiction, the characters are fluid, shadowy figures; in *Déluge*, they are different selves – and, at the same time, they are others.

The process of mourning is explored in minute detail. At first, *l'entredeux* is experienced in terms of 'amputation de voix' (p.50), numbness, silence. Ascension is 'cette plaie sans bords' (p.55), too hurt to think about or express her pain, but gradually 'à légers coups de pensée mais sans y toucher sans y toucher' (p.55), tentatively, for fear of the pain she will awaken, she can begin to re-enter her 'maison intérieur' (p.58), to descend 'son propre escalier intérieur' (p.80), to search within for her lost self. *Déluge* is 'un livre de joie' (p.59), and Ascension is saved by finding her secret self, her 'force majeure', her writing self, which she names Isaac (pp.134-36).²⁴ Writing about her loss
enables her to feel joy and to live again, even if it does not stop the pain (p.145).

Crying is cleansing and healing (p.144) and dreaming is therapeutic in its absurdity – it can make us laugh about what makes us sad (p.189); both crying and dreaming have important parts to play in Ascension’s healing process. Eventually, mourning runs its course and the loss becomes a memory (p.223); but this is experienced also as yet another loss – the loss of the pain of loss itself. Writing (about) the experience is part of the process of mourning, but it is also the attempt to describe, and to retain, the intensity of pain. In the end, however, all we are left with is the memory – and the writing.

In Déluge, it is in the writing that the pain of loss is manifest. Extreme images convey the intensity of that pain: ‘une flèche dans la poitrine’ (p.17), ‘des asphyxies dans les artères’ (p.87), ‘une bête écorchée’ (p.93), although pain is evoked just as effectively by its inexpressibility:

Des sentiments continus: une épaisseur de poison sur les parois du coeur. Des poisons. Comment ça s’appelle? La douleur de maladie consiste justement dans le fait qu’elle est impuissante à nommer, à reconnaître ces sentiments. Si elle arrivait à les reconnaître, elle serait guérie croit-elle. (p.68)

The feelings cannot be identified or named. Naming and identifying bring with them a sense of being in control, but Ascension cannot distance herself at all from what she is feeling. She cannot find the words to help her begin to recognise or understand what she is experiencing.

Subsections to the main text (Silences 1-5 and États de corps 1-3) add to the narrative of Ascension’s experience in a variety of formats. Silence 1, in verse form, and Silence 3, partly in verse, partly in prose, follow what is going through Ascension’s mind:

 Toujours je m’attends au pire de ta part. Et cependant je ne m’y attends pas. Toujours quand tu dis: je te téléphonerai demain, je m’attends à ce que tu ne téléphones pas. Et cependant j’attends que tu téléphones. Et tu ne téléphones pas. Comme je m’y attendais. Et cependant je ne m’y attendais pas. (p.73)
She is thinking back over her relationship with David as though she is talking to him. She is trying to understand how and why the relationship ended. She believed his promises in spite of herself, and was upset when he failed to give her what she did not expect – but wanted – from him. Even though she could rationalise the reality of the relationship, emotionally she was unable to deal with that reality.

*Etat de corps* 2 is a short dream-like section which describes a little child, ‘le petit enfant misérable’, ‘cet enfant frêle’, who is trying to get back into his home the only way possible, by hoisting himself up over the wall (which is growing ever taller as he climbs), the rope hooked to his ear (pp.46-47). However, this is not a dream, nor a moral or philosophical tale (*un conte*), but a portrayal of the way Ascension feels: ‘l’hameçon me transperce l’âme jusqu’au cerveau’ (p.47). It is as though she is locked out of herself, and the journey to get back in will be a long, painful struggle. The physical state, pain and exertion of the little boy reflects and illustrates Ascension’s psychological state, pain and exertion in dealing with her grief.

*Déluge* is an account of the experience of a particular loss, but it also relates to loss in a more universal way. The specific scenario is de-particularised by the fluid, slippery nature of Cixous’s narrators and figures, the paucity of temporal or spatial references, and the emphasis on internal (psychological) effects rather than on external (physical) concerns. Although at times the narration is punctuated by references to specific days of the week, this relates more to the sense of living only from day to day, which commonly occurs in the wake of a trauma, than to any real chronological specificity.

The pain of the loss of a relationship is echoed throughout the text by other losses: the deaths of a grandmother (p.106), a father (p.110), a child (p.157, 176), a lover (p.167), and the loss of the child within (the self) (p.178). Ascension’s tragedy is linked
to other literary tragedies: to Racine’s *Phèdre*, to Caesar’s betrayal by Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, and to Kriemhild’s loss of Siegfried in the *Nibelungen*. Intertextual references of this sort fulfil several roles. Firstly, they reinforce the intensity of Ascension’s pain. David is not dead, nor does Ascension die of her grief, but, whether the reader agrees or not, it is argued that this does not make hers any less a tragedy. Secondly, literary references serve to universalise the loss they analogise. Thirdly, these intertextual references could be considered in agonistic terms, situating Cixous’s text in relation to a tradition of great tragedies in classical literature.

On numerous occasions, the narrative slides from *je* to an unspecified *nous*, ‘tous nous sommes des bêtes nourries de chair aimée’ (p.12), ‘nous ne pouvons pas vivre sans “lui”, sans “elle”, sans la personne, sans le coeur secret” (p.139). From describing a specific loss, the narration slips to a meditation on loss in more universal terms, thus connecting the loss which is the subject of *Déluge* to the losses which are part of all our lives. At times this is effected to an extreme:

> Nous ne savons pas ce que trahir-et-abandonner veut dire. La trahison dans la nature humaine est infinie. Nous ne pouvons même pas imaginer le millionième de nos trahisons. De nos sentiments de trahisons. La trahison nous trahit. Nous trahisonne. Nous-même nous nous trahissons dix fois, cent fois par jour, nous nous ôtons nous-même le pain de la bouche, nous laissons tomber dans l’escalier l’enfant que nous avons sauvé du feu. Je ne nous comprendrai jamais. L’amour nous échappe, la nature humaine nous échappe. Heureusement. Loin de nous la trahison trahit. (p.159)

*Nous* overtly refers to humanity as a whole in this extract but the effect of its over-determination and of the incantational quality of the passage is to reinforce the inclusion of the reader: everyone is capable of hurting and being hurt – we, ourselves, hurt and are hurt – I, personally, hurt and am hurt. However, the indentation of the last line breaks the rhythm of the incantation and focuses attention on the slippage of the final words.
Although we as individuals may be complicit with humanity’s failings, this does not mean that those failings are part of our nature. It is possible for us, personally, to live differently and, by the way we act, to resist those failings.

Cixous’s poetical writing is seductive, drawing her readers in and holding them with the use of rhythm in language and punctuation. For example, the passage where Ascension goes within herself to find Isaac is a single paragraph two pages long (pp. 136-38). This has the effect of conveying Ascension’s concentration and focus as well as the necessary exclusion of external influences, but it also draws the readers in and includes them in the experience. Ascension’s later questioning and self-questioning has a similar effect:

Et toujours se demandant qui tue qui, qui m’a tuée, qui tué-je, qui tues-tu
toi qui me tues qui frappes-tu en moi, et moi qui en toi désiré-je soit abattre
en pleine poitrine soit égorger qui désiré-je mordre au sang qui cracher, qui
jeter par la fenêtre, et toi qui en moi enterres-tu vivante, qui veux-tu déporter,
recouvrir de tonnes de temps, et moi qui foudroyer du regard qui agenouiller
qui (pp. 203-204)

This paragraph ends without punctuation in mid-sentence and the following paragraph continues the interrupted sentence without an initial capital letter. This format is sustained for two pages. Each unfinished paragraph draws the reader onto the next (like lines of poetry) in a similar (self-)questioning. The breaks are like pauses for breath, a coming up for air, before plunging once again into the maelstrom of the stream of consciousness.

In a different way, the reader is drawn into the writing of the text itself:

Il fait si sombre ici où je cherche une langue qui ne fait pas de bruit
pour chuchoter ce qui n’est ni vivant ni mort. Tous les mots sont trop forts, trop rapides, trop assurés, je cherche les noms des ombres entre les mots, comment s’appellent les choses qui restent,
Comment s’appelle l’amour qui reste après l’amour
Je t’aime n’est pas vrai, je ne t’aime pas est faux. (p. 111)
The narrator’s meditation on the inadequacy of language to describe the nuances and subtleties of the feelings she is trying to convey involve the reader in the creation of the text. However, in addition to encouraging reflection on the limitations of language in this respect as well as on the feelings themselves, the reader is sensitised to the poetical possibilities of the language used to describe its inadequacies. Paradoxically, in this poetical lamentation of a lack of words, the liberating potential of language is brought to the fore as the inexpressible (‘des ombres entre les mots’) is expressed. Elsewhere, the end of grieving is evoked with Cixousian artistry: ‘La mort avait fini de vivre. Maintenant elle mourait’ (p.221). This statement is striking in its simplicity and effectiveness. Death cannot die - but, here, it does. In a concise but poetical way, the phrase conveys the intensity of the pain as well as the finiteness of it. Mourning is a process: pain and grief come upon us and leave us again, independently of our will.

Déluge is an exploration of – and a meditation on – loss and mourning. The narration slips and slides between various first person and third person positions. The reader is thus sometimes reading with Ascension, sometimes about her, and sometimes about the universal aspects of loss. Although the reader is drawn into the text in many different ways, and although, at times, s/he becomes party to the pain of loss, grief and mourning, the effect of reading (about) loss in Déluge is different from that in Constant’s texts. The universal aspects and the meditative qualities of Déluge take the reader within him/herself, and s/he is thus encouraged to make connections between the loss described in the text, loss in more general terms, and his/her own personal loss(es). To read (about) the experience of loss in Déluge can, therefore, be to remember our own experiences. It may go further than that, moreover, as the detailed and nuanced terms in which the effects of loss, pain and grieving are formulated can enable us to do more than remember.
If we recognise the feelings described as our own, then Cixous’s text can help us get back in touch with our own pain and grieving. This is not grieving again but, as Susan Rubin Suleiman suggests in *Risking Who One Is*, we may be able to recover [...] an irrecoverable absence’, not of the lost loved one but of loss itself (p.214). In *Déluge*, this point is materially reinforced typographically by a blank half-page which comes mid-way through a chapter – the reader actually loses the narrative and the text (p.97). In common with Norman Holland’s findings in *5 Readers Reading*, Suleiman argues that readers often go further than simply identifying with characters, situations, or conflicts. In a similar way to the character, Queria, in Baroche’s *L’Hiver de beauté* (see Chapter 2), readers may make connections between their reading and their own lives in a process of ‘self-recognition’; in this connection, in *Risking Who One Is*, Suleiman defines a mode of reading ‘which consists of reading another’s story “as if it were one’s own”’ (*Risking Who One Is*, pp.7-8).

In *Déluge*, the text itself invites a consideration of its cathartic qualities. The biblical Flood, which the title evokes, is a cathartic event in the sense of a purification; the Flood was a cleansing and purging process, punishing and rescuing humanity from wickedness and corruption. Moreover, in Aristotelian terms, catharsis is associated with classical theatrical tragedy, and indeed tragedy is endemic to Cixous’s text – in Ascension’s loss, in intertextual references and in theatrical metaphors. If reading *Déluge* can (re)awaken our own experiences of loss, perhaps it can also enable a working through of that experience, for: ‘Pour oublier il faut se souvenir’ (*Déluge*, p.28). In order to forget the pain of loss, in order to remember the lost loved one anew, we need first to remember the loss itself. Reading (about) loss in *Déluge* may therefore have a cathartic effect on its
readers, putting them back in touch with the pain of loss but also bringing them relief from it.

Furthermore, since the process of mourning is invoked, the psychoanalytical sense of catharsis may also be relevant to reading. In *Déluge*, ‘cent deuils se jettent dans ce deuil’ (p.175), and in addition to the losses we may consciously remember, in Kleinian terms all mourning is a reworking of our primary loss (of the mother). Reading is not, and cannot be, a psychoanalytic analysis in which we re-enact the Kleinian depressive position differently, but it may give us a way of understanding our own feelings and experiences in the light of psychological processes. In *Déluge*, the loss of the self is inextricably connected with the loss of the mother. In an oneiric episode where she is trying to ‘rentrer chez soi’ (p.45), Ascension misses the train which leaves without her but with ‘ma mère dessus’ (p.46). She decides she needs to paint before leaving (for painting will enable her to see properly) even though she risks missing the train. Her mother cannot wait and leaves, ‘[elle] disparaît, comme une pensée’ (p.48). For Ascension, painting (and writing) puts her back in touch with her childhood, and she can also create ‘tout ce qu’il faut’ (p.49) – something new out of her loss, something to help her deal with her loss. Kleinian resonances of reparation and mourning are unmistakeable in this passage and they give us a way of understanding and of reading the text.

Remembering is commemorative, but it is also a reparative process: when the pain of loss begins to ease, we can, in Michael Worton’s words, start the work of (re-)creating ‘an imaginative history’ – of remembering and loving after our love has gone – and of re-building our inner world (‘Thinking through photography’, p.750).

As a meditation on loss, *Déluge* is also a reflection on loving and hurting. Readers may be drawn in to share in Ascension’s sense of loss, but they are also encouraged by
the text to reflect on questions of innocence and guilt in a particular loving relationship, in loving relationships more generally, in their own loving relationship(s). In contrast to Angst, which narrates a specifically woman-centred pain and loss, Déluge forms part of the Cixousian oeuvre which is not gender specific. Although Ascension’s pain is that of a woman abandoned by her male lover, the loss and the pain is not restricted to that of Ascension, to that of a woman, or even to that of women: ‘Chacun pleurera, chacun est pleuré, chacun pleure, tous boivent, tous sont bus’ (p.14). The tous does not exclude men, and indeed, David’s own position is considered: ‘D’après Agathe, David aura vécu toutes ces années dans la terreur de s’entendre dire: “Je ne t’aime plus”, du jour au lendemain. D’après Agathe, qui a été abandonné abandonne. D’après David, ce n’est pas de cela qu’il s’agit’ (p.122). It may be that David’s fear of being abandoned is what makes him leave Ascension, but, on the other hand, even though the narrator acknowledges that David has his own point of view, she does not pretend to explain (to reduce) his motives.

By means of a consideration of different perspectives – chapters entitled Points de vue 1-4, and extended speculations, ‘ou bien’ (p.123); ‘non ce n’est pas ça’ (p.124); ‘ou plutôt’ (p.125); ‘ou bien’ (p.127); ‘mais d’un autre point de vue’ (p.128) – we are led to understand that the potential to hurt forms part of any loving relationship. The person we love most, simply by being the person we love most, is the person who can hurt us most. With Ascension, we are led to realise that we too have the potential to hurt those who love us, and that we may do so even without realising it. In this respect also, Klein’s work on the infantile depressive position can be enlightening and can provide a way of understanding destructiveness in relationships. Loss, fear of loss, and the conflicts
between destructive and reparative impulses are an intrinsic part of loving, and all our relations with others depend on how we deal with the depressive position in infancy.

It is axiomatic that the cathartic qualities of *Déluge* will not be effective for all readers. We all have to face loss (or at least the idea of loss) in our lives – for (our own) death is part of life – but we do not all read with the same effect. As Suleiman admits, in *Risking Who One Is*, ‘it all depends’ on the complexities of the relations between experience and imagination in any one individual (p.205), and there are surely as many readers who do not want or need to read (about) loss as there are those who do. It is possible that *Déluge* may be critiqued as self-indulgent, a wallowing in self-pity (on the part of the author, narrator or reader), but its interrogative nature and its universalising elements stand in its defence.

In *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, Cixous states that ‘we need the books that hurt us’ (p.53): we need to cry in order to be able to laugh, we need to lose in order to live. *Déluge* may be a painful text to read – we may cry with Suleiman’s ‘autobiographical resonance’ (*Risking Who One Is*, p.206), we may work through our own fears or pain, or we may simply be touched by the poetry of its writing – but, above all, it holds us for a while in *l’entredeux*. *Déluge* is a poetical celebration of loss – of its pain and of the joy of living and creating it engenders. Ascension descends into herself and climbs back out on ‘the ladder’ of writing; whether our reading experience is cathartic or meditative, perhaps we too can emerge from the text stronger and more alive.

**CHRISTIANE BAROCHE**

In her work, Baroche explores life after loss – the remnants of what, in the ‘Postface’ to *L’Hiver de beauté*, she describes as ‘cet amalgame de désirs, de passions,
d’ambitions et de certitudes que nous sommes tous à un moment ou à un autre’ (p323). Her novels are concerned with how we pick up the pieces, how we live after loss has wounded us to the very heart of our identity. Her characters are frequently marked by loss – Jaime in *Les Ports du silence*, whose parents were killed in the Second World War; Isabelle in *L’Hiver de beauté*, who comes back from a living death (that of physical, psychological, social and financial ruin); Judith in *La Rage au bois dormant*, rejected as a child by her father, then losing first her lover, Jean, and later their son, Emmanuel, in two separate wars. It is this latter novel, *La Rage au bois dormant*, which will be considered here in relation to reading (about) loss.

In *La Rage au bois dormant*, the story of the lives of two women friends, Adèle Dausse and Judith Fautrelot now both in old age, loss is an inherent part of life. The stories of these two women, interwoven with the loss of friends and family, are built up as they, separately and together, go back over the past and recount their memories, supplemented by those of their *notaire* and friend, Georges Falloires.

Judith’s life is deeply marked, firstly, by the fact that her father neither loves her nor wants her. Narcissistic and a dandy, he is ‘un impuissant de coeur’ (p.83), interested only in himself, and caring neither for his wife, his daughter, his mother, nor for the young men who constitute his homosexual adventures, other than as reflections of a positive image of himself. His rejection of Judith is ‘un gouffre’ from which she never recovers but with which she has to learn to live (p.76).

Judith’s lover, Jean (Adèle’s brother), is captured, tortured and killed in the Second World War, an event later echoed and repeated by the death of their son, Emmanuel, in the Algerian War. Judith is devastated by the loss of Jean, then of Emmanuel, their deaths bringing her ‘la folie’ (p.119) and ‘le vide’ (p.277). She is an active witness to Jean’s
shooting by German soldiers, dressing in red, white and blue, and representing for Jean *le tricolore* and thus the liberation of France, for which he gave his life in the Resistance (p.117). After Jean’s murder, Judith becomes ‘dure comme une lame’ (p.113), ‘froide comme une banquise’ (p.224), taking her revenge by leading guerilla action against the Germans, blowing up a munitions train and yard (p.118), and attacking convoys and patrols (p.221).

On her son’s death, Judith is mad with grief, ‘elle n’était pas comme folle, elle l’était en plein’ (p.307), taking the dead Emmanuel out of the military coffin in Algeria, threatening a massacre if anyone tries to stop her, and talking to Emmanuel on the journey back to France as if he were still alive. In both instances, she acts first – and it is only later that her anger turns to tears (pp.128, 307). Moreover, she rejects official honours for both her lost loved ones, spitting at the War Memorial from which she has effaced Jean’s name (p.277) and spuming military medals for Emmanuel (p.305). 

Judith’s marriage to Loup is one of conflict and disillusion, ending with his suicide (p.308). She marries him, needing to live again after the death of Jean (p.188), and to believe in something (p.209), but on her Venetian honeymoon, she realises he will never replace Jean (p.213). Judith admits that Loup meant little to her: ‘mon mari n’a pas laissé de brûlures plus profondes que celle de la cire quand la chandelle s’éteint’ (p.106). There is no pain or sense of loss, just a residue (memory). The tragedies in Judith’s life are devastating, but her great loves and losses are supplemented by her love of horses, by friendships, by the close relationships she has with Germain, and with Bernard and François Esposite, by her work, and, as ‘une femme de pouvoir’ (p.318), by her strong character and her liking for power. In spite of – or perhaps because of – her losses, Judith gets on with living – in an active, practical way.
Adèle’s life also is punctuated by a series of losses: childhood separation from her father; the madness and death of her mother; the death of her brother (Jean); a difficult relationship with her daughter; the absence and then death of her lover; the death of her husband, Armand; separation from her son, who lives in South America; and Judith’s frequent absences. However, Adèle alludes to Armand’s death only in passing: ‘ce pôvre Armand disparu’ (p.288) and she recounts her mother’s death in quite objective terms: “‘Adélaïde Dausse, née Grampian, ne s’est pas réveillée de l’horreur, elle est morte au bout de trois ou quatre mois, je n’allais même plus la voir, elle était dans son lit comme un légume. Si tu veux mon avis, un poireau te reconnaît davantage’” (p.68).

Many of the losses in Adèle’s life are related as events without exploring or taking account of her feelings about them, although she says she misses Jean (p. 251) and she expresses feelings of abandonment brought about by Judith’s absence (p.279). In La Rage au bois dormant, it is time passing and growing old which concerns Adèle most. Ageing is loss in itself – the loss of youth, of desire, and of people: “‘...quand je me retourne, il n’y a plus que des morts derrière moi. Et même, certains ont disparu de ma mémoire, ce qui est pire que tout. Perdre ceux qu’on aimait dans les chausse-trappes de sa pauvre tête, ça coupe bras et jambes, tu sais’” (p. 106). If Adèle’s memories do not evoke the pain of past losses, she suffers from the realisation that she is beginning (or fearing) to lose even the memories of those she has loved, and it is the desire to keep hold of the past which motivates her: “‘Ma vie fut un roman. Après nous, Judith, qui le saura?’” (p.13). Adèle, who, at seventy-nine and ten years older than Judith, can imagine little future for herself, needs them both to recount their memories, to tell the story of their lives, in order to save something of her life.
Indeed, it is the ‘telling’ of the story that is the subject of Baroche’s novel. The speculation, imagination, and invention which go to make up the women’s life-stories are brought to the fore by means of further layers of fictionality. The title of the novel at once evokes and opposes the classic fairy tale, ‘La Belle au bois dormant’, and multiple references are made to the women’s lives as 'romans'. The form of the novel itself, a series of monologues and dialogues, is not only self-consciously textual but also theatrical: the first section, headed ‘avant le lever du rideau’, comes complete with cast list and scene-setting (pp.11-12) and is echoed ironically at the end by Adèle’s final raising of the curtain at her window (p.326). This is ironic because ‘le rideau’ stands for both theatricality and gossip here. Instead of the theatrical curtain coming down at the end of the performance (the novel), Adèle’s curtain is raised and the process of speculation and gossip, which makes up the novel, is set to continue.

Furthermore, Judith’s story is the stuff of fiction and the drama of her past is played out in front of the local people: the occasion of her first meeting with Jean (p.64), the episode when she threatens her father with a hunting knife (p.66), the market day when she publicly confronts Loup with her mare, Jubilation, who has previously attacked and disabled him (pp.176-78). Judith’s actions turn her into a larger-than-life figure, a diversion for the townspeople, and their speculations are inspired by her adventures. Falloires admits that he is drawing his own conclusions about Judith’s childhood, although they are based on her own memories (p.47), he imagines that she must have buried Emmanuel somewhere with Jean, although he has no way of knowing for certain (p.306). On the one hand, Judith is variously described as ‘l’espèce de centauresse’ (p.64), ‘une sorte d’ange de la mort’ (p.289), and she is said to have a mysterious (mythical) affinity with the Esposite bulls (p.141); she is turned into a legend in her own
life-time, a legend nourished by rumours which take hold during her absence (p.142).

On the other hand, her presence enlivens the banality of everyday life (p.147): her
‘bagarres’ make the lives of others more interesting (p.179), particularly Adèle, who has
no ‘histoire sans tes histoires, c’est simple’ (p.279). Judith’s exploits are an important
part of Adèle’s own life-story.

Remembering is a creative activity: remembering involves not only the recovery of
memories but also the interpretation of them:

“A cinq ans, Judith, j’avais des cheveux si blonds, bouclés si court qu’on
m’habillait d’une peau de mouton, la nuit de Noël, et qu’on me couchait
dans la paille de la crèche. Qui peut se vanter comme moi d’avoir
remplacé l’enfant Jésus? Tu vois bien, tu vois bien ...” (p.19)

Adèle remembers taking part in the Christmas crèche, but it is as an image that she
describes it, as if from the outside, and it is an image which evokes children’s picture
book portrayals of the nativity. As a traditionally feminine, pretty little girl, Adèle likens
herself to ‘une poupée dans sa boîte’ and ‘une princesse de film’ (p.23), an idol and an
object which was dressed up purely to be looked at, and she compares herself
anachronistically with the American child film star, Shirley Temple (p.29). Memories of
the past are recovered and, in the telling, they are (re-)created from the perspective of the
future.

Adèle weaves her own fantasies into memories of Judith’s life. She speculates on
Judith’s frequent periods of absence, imagining that Judith is everything that her own
mother wanted her to be: a mythical siren, ‘un robot dangereux’, seductive to men but
indifferent to them, using her sexuality to get the better of them (p.279). Memories of
Judith’s wedding preparations prompt Adèle to remember and think about her
relationship with Armand. She transposes her own ‘passion substituée’ onto Judith
(p.173): while Adèle makes love to Armand, in her fantasies she also makes love to
Urbain, and she assumes that Jean must be present in a similar way in Judith’s sexual relationship with Loup. Remembering, interpreting and recounting Judith’s relationships enable Adèle to recover her own memories. In romanticising Judith’s relationships, she nourishes her memories and recaptures some of her own past feelings.

Perhaps Adèle’s greatest loss is the loss of her illusions. In answer to her letter, asking Judith to confide in her, to tell her her secrets and the truth about her life, Judith is uncompromisingly honest, refusing enclosure in Adèle’s ‘belles images’ (p.318). Judith’s realism, her ‘yeux d’acide’ (p.317), opposes the ‘roman rose’ that Adèle has created around their lives (p.292). Judith tells Adèle the truth about Armand’s financial dealings, and stresses the banality of her own life: there was no mystery to her frequent absences – she was simply away working (p.292). Jean was the only great love of her life, but she questions whether their relationship would have lasted, had he lived (p.319); when she told him that she was pregnant (with Emmanuel), his reaction, “‘c’est bien le moment!’”, was hurtful and far from supportive (p.320). However, in an ironical twist at the end of the novel, Judith finds that her scepticism (and indeed her own imagination) has misled her. She wrongly assumes that Falloires would have told Adèle her secret – that her companion, Germain, is Jean’s son by ‘la “Chinoise”’, the woman he was involved with before Judith. Moreover, she mistakenly imagines that the existence of this ‘second neveu tombé du ciel’ was the reason for Adèle’s departure for South America (p.324). Her cynicism has deprived Adèle and Germain of many years of affection.

Once again, however, Judith’s life feeds Adèle’s fantasies. Discovering that Germain is Jean’s son makes her wonder about the nature of his relationship with Judith. She has found a new mystery with which to fuel her imagination. She can begin to compensate for the loss of her illusions by creating yet another fiction, by weaving a new
romance around Judith and Germain, and, in doing so, recovering, in fantasy, her ‘beaux quarante ans [...] là où les désirs effacent les années’, remembering her own past desires (p.326).

In *La Rage au bois dormant*, loss figures from the perspective of its aftermath. The novel focuses on the ways in which the two women deal with loss, how they live after it and with it, and in these terms, it is, in Shoshana Felman’s words, ‘a testimony: to survival’, testifying ‘at once to life and to the death – the dying – the survival has entailed’ (*What Does a Woman Want?*, p.16). In *La Rage au bois dormant*, Judith survives through anger and activity, taking revenge and then picking up the pieces of her life, her horses, her friends, her work. In a different way, Adèle also gets on with her life, immersed in the minutiae of day-to-day existence, bringing up children – and gossiping. For both Judith and Adèle, remembering is a way of dealing with the loss in their lives. Adèle romanticises it, dresses it up, forgetting ‘le goût des vieilles sauces’ (p.17), the pain and the banality. For Judith, remembering is something of an exorcism. It is as though she vomits out her memories (p.17), reliving the bitter tastes of reality: suffering with childhood eczema (p.18), the loss of the pleasure of daily habits (p.124), the pain of coming second (to France) in her loved one’s lives (p.320).

This focus on the *aftermath* of loss means that the readers are not drawn in to share or feel the characters’ loss as much as in Constant’s novels, or to recover their own losses in the way that reading Cixous’s *Déluge* encourages them to do. Nevertheless, the oral nature of the novel and the meditative rumination of the characters do draw the reader in to some extent. Judith addresses an unidentified interlocutor: ‘qu’alliez-vous penser’, and she shares her amusement at Adèle’s romantic re-writing of her life (p.16). Thus the reader is implicated in the telling of the story, although s/he is also kept at somewhat of a
distance. We may speculate with Adèle, but we cannot know. Judith herself cannot tell why she never loved anyone else as much as she loved Jean (p.294), Adèle does not really know Judith, nor did she know Jean (p.318), nor even Armand, and Falloires keeps Judith’s secret from the reader as much as he does from Adèle:

Il y aura toujours un abruti pour demander, alors que penses-tu de ce jeunot qui vit dans sa maison, du type aux yeux bizarres qui se paie vingt ans de moins qu’elle? Et je réponds que cela n’en fait pas une jeunesse mais un quinquagénaire bien tassé! Celui-là n’a jamais été mon affaire, celui-là ... (p.135)

He refers to gossip and speculation about Judith and Germain, but he does not tell what we find out later he knows, and he changes the subject.

Judith and Adèle create a novel out of their lives, out of their losses, out of their memories. The last chapter of *La Rage au bois dormant* is entitled ‘La Rage au bois dormant’, the only chapter narrated by an unknown narrator, a fictional ending to a fictional novel, as well as the ending to the real novel. Moreover, it is an ending which goes some way to satisfying Baroche’s readers’ curiosity about Judith as much as it does Adèle, while reinforcing the plurality of fiction and truth. The stress on fictionality in this last chapter affirms that it is one ending among other possible endings; Germain is Judith’s secret among other possible secrets. It is impossible to know “‘la” vérité’ (p.318), there are many versions, and ours, as well as Adèle’s, is as valid as any other. Rather, we are encouraged to understand the place of fiction in our life: we do create fictions about ourselves and about others; remembering is interpretive, and we (re-)imagine and (re-)create as much as we recover or recapture our memories of the past.

In *Les Nouvelles Maladies de l’âme*, Kristeva stresses the importance of ‘la possibilité de parler une histoire’. By this, she means that to tell a story about one’s life, in psychoanalytical terms, is a way to ‘préserver une vie’, a way of looking at one’s life and, in so doing, to modify and to transform it (p.72). To remember may be cathartic but
it is also creative, and, in both cases, as for Judith and Adèle, it has an important part
to play in helping us to deal with the loss in our lives, whether that be the loss of
illusions, the loss of ageing, or the loss of loved ones.

In *La Rage au bois dormant*, war is ‘un gouffre avalant jusqu’au meilleur de la vie
d’autrefois’ (p.125), taking not only lives away but also ways of life, and scarring the
survivors. In *Risking Who One Is*, Suleiman’s notion of ‘autobiographical reading’
establishes ‘a link between individual and collective experience’, particularly in relation
to experiences of ‘radical loss’, among which she identifies war (p.8). Her own personal
eamples relate to memoirs of Jewish survivors of the Second World War, in which she
recognises ‘aspects of [her] own life-story in another’s’ (p.204). She stresses that this
does not mean that the reader has to have shared the experience s/he is reading about, but
that s/he may read stories that could have been his/her own as a way of recovering and
experiencing the lost past for the first time ‘through the prism of the delayed present’
(p.211). Readers may, therefore, be able to make connections with their own past, with
their family’s past, or with a less specific but culturally shared past.

This is not at all to suggest that specific parallels exist between reading Holocaust
literature and reading (about) loss in *La Rage au bois dormant*. Rather, it is to suggest
that to read (about) loss against a backdrop of war, as we do in Baroche’s novel, may be
to realise the importance of continually remembering ‘les cicatrices’ (p.127), not only by
means of the war memorials and medals that Judith shuns, but also – in reading – by
recovering, re-creating and re-interpreting those losses that we have to learn to live with,
and of trying to make sense of our lives – and of the contemporary world – in the
aftermath of war.
In her review in *Magazine littéraire*, Marie-Laure Delorme describes *La Rage au bois dormant* as ‘un roman de femmes avec des mots d’hommes’, and whether or not one would agree that the language or content of literature can be gendered in this way, *La Rage au bois dormant* can indeed be considered primarily, but not exclusively, a woman-centred novel. Nevertheless, its reader address is not gendered nor is its implied readership; the concerns of the novel (love, loss, memory, creation) are not gender specific. Whether we are men or women, we can all love, we can all lose, we can all remember and fantasise. Importantly, *La Rage au bois dormant* attests to the creativity which is generated by loss. Remembering involves the interpretation as well as the recovery of memories. Furthermore, Baroche’s novel celebrates life, in its drama and its monotony, in its realism and its fantasy, in living and dying. To read (about) loss in *La Rage au bois dormant* is to understand that loss is a part of life, and that remembering it is a necessary part of living. More specifically, to read (about) loss in this novel can be considered in terms of Cixous’s ‘l’anti-oubli’: reading (about) loss is remembering not to forget – (about) loss, (about) war, and (about) being human.

**SUMMARY**

The fictional texts chosen for discussion in this chapter portray loss in a variety of different ways and they necessarily invite a variety of different responses from their readers. Traditionally, dramatic portrayals of loss and tragedy induce a cathartic effect in the spectators, engaging and purging their emotions. Reading (about) loss in a literary text is obviously not the same as attending a performance of a theatrical tragedy, although it may produce some similar effects. In content and texture, Constant’s texts transmit a sense of the fear and pain of loss, positioning readers close to Tiffany’s and Chrétienne’s
experiences. Likewise, Cixous’s poetical writing conveys the pain of loss, but *Déliege* is also a celebration of the creativity which is engendered by loss; the reading experience of this text may be cathartic or meditative, since the writing encourages its readers to think about their own loss(es) and relationships with others. To read Baroche’s *La Rage au bois dormant* is to understand that loss is a part of life. The oral tone of this novel draws the readers in and the over-determination of its fictional qualities encourages them to think about the creativity of the process of remembering as well as the part it plays in recovering and reinterpreting loss.

None of the fictional texts under discussion are gender specific in either reader address or content, and reading (about) loss in these texts is not, therefore, necessarily a gender specific experience. In general terms, the reading effects may be considered to be similarly applicable to both male and female readers. However, several of the texts can be fairly described as primarily women-centred texts. This is certainly not because they are all written by women writers (for example, neither Constant’s *Balta* nor her *Ouregano* are ‘women-centred’), but the preponderance of female voices as well as the primacy of women (or girls) who lose in the texts would seem to justify such an appellation. Perhaps, therefore, these texts offer a space for women to read (about) loss specifically as women. If this is the case, the personal response of the woman reader may find resonances and make connections with a collective (women’s) experience of loss and, perhaps, even with what they have lost in ‘becoming women’. From the point of view of the individual woman, to make connection with, and to share, other women’s experiences through reading can be a supportive, enriching and empowering process: such moments of intersection with a collective (women’s) identity have their part to play in the ongoing creation of one’s own individual identity. Furthermore, for men as well as women to
listen to girls' and women's voices – in texts or in life – and to listen out for their strengths as well as their losses, surely contributes to the valuable, political (feminist) work of negating negative perceptions of women's identity. Reading, in this context, has a dual role to play: that of connecting individual women readers to a collective identity; and that of enabling the ongoing construction of a culture – of a world – of which texts are a part, to be open to the voices and perspectives of both men and women.

It must, however, be conceded that gender is only part of our identity – and part of our reading position. Indeed, irrespective of gender identification, an important response to reading (about) loss in all of the texts under consideration is that of remembering loss. Remembering attests to survival after loss but, above all, it means that we do not forget that loss is part of all our lives. To remember (the pain of) loss through reading may involve recovery (or rediscovery), entail a cathartic working through of the pain of suffering, or lead to a better understanding of others’ pain. Most importantly, remembering is an essential part of the beneficial, imaginative, reparative processes which enable all of us to deal with loss in our lives. To read (about) loss is therefore to be touched by it, enabling us to reconnect with our own as well as others’ losses. To read (about) loss is to remember – to recover, to interpret and (re-)create – and, in doing so, perhaps to strengthen the self and to transform our relationships with other people.

Although this chapter has only partly addressed gender-specific readings, the next chapter focuses more specifically on reading and women's identity as it explores the place of mothering relations in women's psychological development.
been loved and hurt internally (p.67), although she maintains that this is art’s secondary function; its
Ladder of Writing,
Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945,
pp.210-18. In this connection, see Marion
Milner,
^ See Hélène Cixous,
Klein
primary role is that of creating something new (p. 160).
With reference to Klein’s work, that one of the ‘functions’ of painting is to recreate externally what has
beings more ‘structural’ than ‘chronological’ (Klein, p.122).
M Mitchell usefully explains Klein’s key concept of ‘phantasy’, which is
spelt with ‘ph’ to indicate that it is an unconscious process and to differentiate it from ‘fantasy’, which in
psychoanalysis is an articulation or staging of unconscious desire. According to Mitchell, Kleinian
phantasy ‘emanates from within and imagines what is without, it offers an unconscious commentary on
instinctual life and links feelings to objects and creates a new amalgam: the world of imagination […]
Phantasy is both the activity and its products’ (p.23). In Klein’s work, phantasy relates to the psychical
interactions between an infant’s internal and outer worlds.
^ Hanna Segal usefully explains Klein’s use of the term ‘position’ in preference to a ‘stage’ of development
as being more structural than ‘chronological’ (Klein, p.122).
p.186.
^ Melanie Klein, ‘Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse’, in
Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945, pp.210-18. In this connection, see Marion
Milner, On Not Being Able to Paint, where the author, who is both a painter and psychoanalytic, considers,
with reference to Klein’s work, that one of the ‘functions’ of painting is to recreate externally what has
been loved and hurt internally (p.67), although she maintains that this is art’s secondary function; its
primary role is that of creating something new (p.160).
^ See, in particular, Melanie Klein, ‘Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States’, in Love, Guilt
and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945, pp.344-69.
^ See Hélène Cixous, Dedans (Paris: des femmes, 1986). See also Hélène Cixous, Three Steps on the
Ladder of Writing, pp.11-12; ‘La Venue à l’écriture’, p.13; ‘Le temps de l’oubli...de l’histoire’, in Hélène
^ Julia Kristeva, ‘An Interview with Julia Kristeva’, Partisan Review, 61 (1994), pp.120-31 (p.120);
^ Elisabeth Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic (Manchester: Manchester
^ I accept that readers may well speculate about connections between textual content and the biography of
p.186, describes Constant’s La Fille du Gobemator as an ‘exorcism’; see Paule Constant, La Fille du
Gobemator (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). Cixous’s fiction also has overtly autobiographical resonances, and
Baroche declares her own loss in the dedication to La Rage au bois dormant: ‘Pour Hélène, ma mère, en
mémoire. Pour Clara, pour Marie-Thérèse Lecomte, pour Lynn Salkin Sbiroli: le vent les emportera...’.
Nevertheless, the subject of this study is the interaction between the reader’s identity and the text.
^ Paule Constant: Ouregano (Paris: Gallimard, 1980); Le Grand Ghâpal (Paris: Gallimard, 1991);
^ In this connection, a most interesting and powerful example of the physical description of psychological
effects can be found in Melanie Tem, ‘Lightning Rod’, in Wild Women, ed. Sue Thomas (London: Vintage,
1994), pp.291-99. In this short story, the pain and fear of two women, trying to protect their loved ones
from pain and fear by taking it on themselves, is evoked and experienced in terms of electric shocks,
complete with the scars and smells of burning flesh.
^ See, for example, Patricia Duffy, ‘Layye versus Constant: A Child’s Perspective of Africa’, AUMLA, 81
(May 1994), pp.65-79, which relates Tiffany’s situation to the effects of colonialism.
See Chapter 5, pp.237-45, for discussion of an ethics of reading in respect of these aspects of Constant’s novels.

20 'Tiffany' is an unusual name in French, evoking American decorative glass and thus complementing her surname, Murano, which is also the name of the centre of Venetian glass-making. However, Constant’s character’s real name is not ‘Tiffany’ but the ordinary, and very French, Marie-Françoise. In Propriété privée, the narration makes it clear that Tiffany, the girl, bears little relation to either of her names, ‘le rien’ of ‘Tiffany’ and ‘le néant’ of Marie-Françoise (p.16).


See Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).


It is also interesting to reflect upon this choice of name. Firstly, in the Bible, Abraham planned to sacrifice his most loved son, Isaac, to God, as a supreme act of faith. In Déluge, Isaac is the writing self which cannot be sacrificed, engendering a faith in itself ‘sans dieu et sans religion’ (p.135). Secondly, Cixous’s Isaac is ‘un tellement’, loving and compassionate (p.163), and as such would have much in common with the Biblical Isaac who is gentle, faithful, affectionate and constant. Although Isaac is a male name, Isaac, in Déluge, is, admits Clarice, a ‘personnage peu probable. Mais passionnant à imaginer. En tant qu’homme et femme’ (p.163). Our inner selves do not (necessarily) conform to biologically or socioculturally imposed sexual identities. Finally, in the New Testament Isaac is equated with laughter, and, in Déluge too, Isaac is ‘la joie’ (pp.134-35).


23 Cixous takes up this theme of promising again in La Fiancée juive de la tentation (Paris: des femmes, 1995). The emotions vested in a loving relationship render the making and the interpretation of promises difficult (p.88).

See Jean Laplanche & J.-B. Pontalis, Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967). Laplanche & Pontalis state that catharsis is a part of all psychotherapy and that ‘la cure permet au sujet d’évoquer et même de revivre les événements traumatiques auxquels ces affects sont liés et d’abréger ceux-ci’ (p.60). It involves recovery, re-living and emotional relief from a traumatic event.

24 In What Does a Woman Want?, in a footnote to the point she is making about women’s autobiographical writing, Felman makes reference to feminist psychoanalytic work on trauma that women may experience in common, but she also takes the concept further to include traumatic everyday events that are part of being a woman in modern society. She argues, therefore, that women’s lives implicitly contain the story of a trauma.


26 Cixous’s je/Ascension has two voices; Baroche’s Judith and Adèle both speak; and, although neither Tiffany nor Chrétienne speak as such in Constant’s novels, the narrative technique transmits their ‘voices’. However, the women do not necessarily lose because they are women, although the complexities of ‘being a woman’ (biologically, socio-culturally and psychologically) are no doubt also involved in any individual experience and response to loss. Similarly, men’s identity as men would be involved in their experiences and responses.
4. SUBJECTS IN LOVE?

WOMEN-TO-WOMEN RELATIONSHIPS

In *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère*, Luce Irigaray asserts that patriarchal societies and cultures ‘fonctionnent originairement sur un matricide’ (p. 15), and that the social order rests ‘sur le meurtre de la mère’ (p. 81). The symbolic murder of the mother is necessary to the functioning of the patriarchal social order which is based on (or which at least, by definition, entails) the oppression of women. In psychoanalytical terms, this ‘matricide’, the repression of the mother as origin and primary object of desire, is an aspect of psychosexual development necessitated by the incest taboo. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 3 through the work of Klein and Kristeva, separation from the mother is essential to the process of individuation and the constitution of the self.

It follows, for Irigaray, that women’s relationship with the mother is strongly implicated in their own sense of selfhood and identity, since a woman needs both to identify with her mother as a woman and also to differentiate from her. In *Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère*, mimicking Freud, Irigaray declares that ‘le rapport mère-fille est le continent noir du continent noir’ (p. 61): the mother-daughter relationship is the unexplored key to women’s sexuality, itself, for Freud, a territory which remained unexplored and (to draw out the connotations of his colonial metaphor) uncharted, unknown, primitive, other, exotic, savage, dangerous, threatening, uncolonised, and perhaps uncolonisable.

Women as (murdered) mothers may be ‘le sous-sol’, the infrastructure, of the (patriarchal) social order (*Le Corps-à-corps*, p. 81) but, even though this may be
conceived in positive terms, it is women's reproductive function rather than any other aspect of their identity which makes them so. In *Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère*, Irigaray maintains that girls therefore have difficulty constituting an identity for themselves in relation to 'quelqu'une qui n'est qu'une fonction' (p.86). Moreover, women themselves collude in symbolic matricide, and thus in the maintenance of patriarchy, because, according to Irigaray, they have no recourse to any imaginary or symbolic formulations of the mother other than phallocentric ones in a culture which is indifferent to sexual differences. In *Je, tu, nous*, for example, she identifies the need to work towards a sexuate culture, sensitive to the different experiences and needs of both men and women. Women themselves must therefore work towards creating, in the imaginary and the symbolic, identities that do not deny the woman in the mother but that can 'lui donner droit au plaisir, à la jouissance, à la passion [...] aux paroles, et pourquoi pas parfois aux cris, à la colère' (*Le Corps-à-corps*, p.28). For Irigaray, the woman in the mother must be allowed to exist, to speak, to experience pleasure — and to express anger — in order for women (and their daughters) to live as subjects (and not merely as functions) in society.

While other theorists do not necessarily share Irigaray's dramatic vocabulary or her breadth of vision, maternity has been a fairly constant concern of modern feminist studies, from the problematics of women's relations with their mothers to the ambivalence of their experiences as mothers. Motherhood is a complex issue for feminists, since it has been both identified as the root of women's oppression and celebrated in the name of women's 'difference'. Maternal models and metaphors are widely used to conceptualise ideal (utopian) visions of the future, while other analyses have attempted to untangle biological maternal functions from socio-culturally attributed maternal qualities. Indeed, women's mothering *per se* is implicated in the reproduction
(and thus reinforcement) of patriarchy. In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Nancy Chodorow argues that the mothering and relational capacities of women are reproduced psychologically through the internalisation of women's 'extensive and nearly exclusive mothering role' in society (p.30). Mother-child relationships are thus involved not only in the assumption of gender roles but also in the 'relational development' of the individual (p.166). Chodorow concludes that 'a fundamental reorganization of parenting' is required, so that men are actively able to share 'primary parenting' (p.215). Via different routes, other theorists also come to similar conclusions, notably Elisabeth Badinter in *L'Amour en plus* and bell hooks. Although interesting for their analyses, the common solutions they propose (that men should be involved in primary parenting) leave women dependent *again* on men and on men's actions.\(^7\)

In 'Stabat Mater', Julia Kristeva, analysing the redundancy for contemporary women of Christianity's valorisation of maternity and the cult of the Virgin Mother, concludes that there is no valid discourse on maternity to succeed it. Men's fantasies and desires have historically been projected onto the figure of Mary to produce an idealised image of womanhood and (virgin) motherhood which 'aucune femme singulière ne saurait incarner' (p.308). According to Kristeva, the Madonna (who is powerful but submissive to God) serves to reconcile unconscious needs of primary narcissism and some social remnants of matriliney with modern patriarchal society (p.323); however, she fails to meet the identification needs of contemporary women, although she may continue to exert pressure on them to conform to an ideal.\(^8\)

As a psychoanalyst, Kristeva is closely concerned with the analysis of the complexities and pitfalls of psychical processes of individuation (of separation from the
mother). In her work, abjection forms part of the individuation process and is thus implicated in the constitution of the self. The abject is that which produces feelings of revulsion and horror, and which, as Kristeva explains in *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: Essai sur l’abjection*, is ‘ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre’ (p.12).^ The abject is at the borders of being. It is also, for Kristeva, connected with primal repression and thus with the (internal) body of the mother, which is therefore both a positive and negative structuring principle in psychical identity formation.

Nevertheless, although (the body of) the mother is in this way always a potential threat to identity, Kristeva does not reject maternity; indeed she values motherhood’s demanding but fulfilling role for women. In terms of her *sujet en procès* (see Chapter 1), pregnancy, childbirth and breast-feeding mean a woman is close to primary bodily drives (to which the semiotic is linked), and yet motherhood also involves the socialisation of the child into the symbolic social order. Women are thus able to constitute themselves as subjects in both spheres, ‘celle de la pulsion et celle de la loi’, such as Kristeva observed in Chinese women on her 1974 visit to China. On the one hand, in ‘Stabat Mater’, she celebrates the jouissance of a mother’s bodily relationship with the child. On the other hand, she argues in ‘Un Nouveau Type d’intellectuel: Le dissident’ that motherhood offers women a unique position in society, which is ‘aux charnières de la socialité – garantie et menace pour sa pérennité’. The survival and the reinforcement of the social order rests on the reproductive and socialising roles of the mother, who, therefore, holds an influential position in society (as guarantor of, or, potentially, as a threat to, its stability), even if she does not have formal socio-political power.

‘Stabat Mater’ was first published in *Tel Quel* and its (re-)contextualisation in Kristeva’s study of love, *Histoires d’amour*, draws particular attention to the question of
maternal love. Indeed in ‘Le Temps des femmes’, Kristeva argues that motherhood offers women the chance of real creativity, not only in terms of procreation, but also in terms of love, as ‘[un] lent, difficile et délicieux apprentissage de l’attention, de la douceur, de l’oubli de soi’. The challenge for women (mothers) is to love an other (the child) to the extent of forgetting the self in love but without sacrificing that self. Kristeva admits that this may for the moment be a utopian ideal of ‘la maternité déculpabilisée’ (p.16). However, perhaps her call at the end of ‘Stabat Mater’ for the formulation of an ethic of maternity (‘l’héréthique’), to be disassociated from Christian morality and fantasies of immortality, is one with which contemporary women can engage in order to attempt to divest motherhood of the guilt which surrounds it (p.327). In Histoires d’amour, metaphor, art, music and literary representation are shown to be the loci and the means of the expression of love in culture, and this would imply, therefore, that they are possible sites for the exploration and creation of a new discourse and ethics of maternity.

Given the changing nature of women’s relations with other women in contemporary society, Kristeva stresses, in ‘Stabat Mater’, the importance of mother-daughter relations (as opposed to the Christian and Freudian idealisation of the mother-son couple). She suggests that a woman’s relationship with her mother, and in turn her relationship with her daughter, provide essential forums for working through the feelings of love and hate which are also involved in relationships with others (‘Stabat Mater’, p.325). Like Irigaray, Kristeva here appears to point to the need to recognise and to accommodate the anger which is present in the mother-daughter relationship.

In The Bonds of Love, an investigation into domination in relationships, Jessica Benjamin focuses on the process of differentiation from the mother (or prime carer). She advances a theory of intersubjectivity, where an on-going two-way tension of
assertion and recognition between the mother and child is productive, enabling the
establishment of a mutual relationship between two subjects (the infant and the mother)
rather than that of subject-object. The child needs to become a subject in his/her own
right; s/he needs also to see the mother as ‘an independent subject’, just as much as the
mother needs to have her own independent existence (p.23). In this schema, the mother’s
own needs as a subject are considered to be as important as those of the child. Following
Nancy Chodorow’s conclusion in The Reproduction of Mothering that fathers should
actively share the care (nurture) of their children, Benjamin also identifies the need for
new parental relationships to stand for ‘integration and the sustaining of tension’ (p.114).
This involves the sharing of roles and respect for the other (subject), in order to offer
children an ideal model of mutual recognition between parents rather than an unequal
sexual power relationship. Benjamin suggests that girls need to identify with their fathers
and to draw ‘a sense of self’ from their mothers as desiring subjects (and not simply as
objects of desire) (p.114). She concludes that changes in individual arrangements need to
be accompanied by attendant transformations in cultural representations as well as in
social organisation, in order to bring about lasting intersubjective relationships (p.218).

Although Irigaray, Kristeva and Benjamin approach motherhood from different
perspectives and draw different conclusions, their analyses share some common factors.
First, their work stresses the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in the
constitution of a woman’s identity, sense of self, and thereby in relations with others.
Second, they all seem to agree that it is important for the mother to retain a sense of self
independent from the child (daughter), so that she (the mother) is perceived as (and is) a
woman in her own right as well as a mother. Third, ambivalence in the mother-daughter
relationship is not merely accepted but rather valued. The tension between identification
and the need for differentiation on the part of the daughter is seen as productive for both mother and daughter – so long as the mother’s needs for recognition as a separate subject are not denied. Indeed, the relationship must be able to accommodate such tension; the working through of love and hate (Kristeva), the expression of anger (Irigaray) or the maintenance of the tension of mutual assertion and recognition (Benjamin) are essential in the creation of mutually beneficial relations between mother and daughter, in which they are both able to exist as separate subjects. Following Melanie Klein (see my Chapter 3), Irigaray, Kristeva and Benjamin appear to admit of anger and hate in positive terms as part of love, and as part of loving relationships, whereas, given the widespread idealisation of maternal love, these feelings are all too commonly perceived as negative ones.

Finally, all three theorists attest to the implication of cultural configurations in perceptions of the self and in relationships with others, although, here, some essential differences between their work remain. Kristeva’s critique of the Christian discourse of motherhood leads her to envisage a non-theological ethics of maternity, the model of which she perhaps situates in the creative (loving) psychoanalytic analyst-analysand relationship (Histoires d’amour, p.471). On the other hand, in ‘Femmes divines’, Irigaray, recognising that ‘aucune constitution de subjectivité ni de société humaines ne s’est élaborée sans assistance du divin’ (p.139), argues that it is essential for women to generate their own divine genealogies, through mother-daughter relationships, in order to be able to accede to – and to create – multiple, non-phallocentric, feminine, social subjectivities (p.146). Benjamin’s work, in common with many other feminist discussions of motherhood working within a fundamentally heterosexual framework, points to the need for actual and imaginary changes in parenting relationships and the
importance of active paternal primary parenting. Irigaray and Kristeva, although ultimately not excluding men in socio-political terms, are above all concerned with mothering (by women) rather than with maternal and paternal parenting.

This chapter will approach women-to-women relationships (not only mothers and daughters but also other ‘mothering’ relationships) in the work of my chosen authors in the light of the above discussion, in order to explore their character, and then, subsequently, to consider the readers’ possible interactions with them in the process of reading. This is not at all to negate women’s (or girls’) relationships with men (or fathers) in these texts (nor indeed those of mothers and sons), but the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship would suggest its particular importance for women’s perceptions of the self, identity and relationships with (both female and male) others. The work of Baroche, Cixous and Constant, three diverse writers, offers a profusion of different women-to-women relationships: friends, sisters and lovers, as well as both literal and figurative mothers and daughters. The texts chosen for analysis in this chapter are all overtly textual: the parodic style of Constant’s *Le Grand Ghâpal* emphasises its own textuality; in Baroche’s *L’Hiver de beauté*, a book is in the process of being written; and Cixous’s *Le Livre de Promethea* is itself a book in the writing. By means of their very textness, all three texts foreground reading and call on their readers to interrogate their own reading positions. The post-1980, and therefore post-feminist, context of the texts’ publication situates them in a moment of contemporary culture in which both the perceptions and the practical realities of mothering and motherhood are in the process of changing, and the inclusion of analysis of (textual) women-to-women relationships in somewhat broad terms thus usefully and fruitfully contributes to the discussion.
PAULE CONSTANT

From the texts discussed in Chapter 3, it would seem that mother-daughter relationships in Constant’s novels are far from productive – indeed that they are destructive. Both Tiffany’s and Chrétienne’s relationships with their mothers are implicated in their loss of self. The girls’ mothers may retain their own sense of identity but this is at the expense of that of their daughters; they neither listen to their daughters (as subjects) nor give them the love and comfort they need. Moreover, the girls’ relationships with other women are, for the most part, no more constructive. For example, in Propriété privée, the only loving relationship Tiffany has is with her grandmother, but the old lady is frail and ill and cannot provide Tiffany with her identification needs. Indeed, when Tiffany is having difficulty settling in at the convent school, she tries (unsuccessfully) to create an identity for her grandmother as a little girl, in order to provide herself with an imaginary friend as well as with a model with which to identify (pp.128-30).

In Constant’s Le Grand Ghâpal, however, women-to-women relationships are of a more complex nature, and this novel will form the basis of this section’s discussion. Le Grand Ghâpal follows the childhood and education, between the ages of seven and fifteen, of another of Constant’s little girl characters – Emilie-Gabrielle. This is a comic novel, set in early eighteenth-century France, and its relevance to this chapter’s discussion of contemporary women-to-women relationships becomes clearer when it is considered in association with Constant’s historical treatise on the education of girls, Un Monde à l’usage des demoiselles.  

In this latter text, Constant values some aspects of the system in which demoiselles (the daughters of the nobility) were educated by women in a (féminine) environment
separated from society and men. In line with a definition proposed by Michel Tournier, she distinguishes between instruction and the initiatory aspects of education:

L’éducation au sens le plus large du mot prépare un enfant à entrer dans la société et à y tenir sa place. Il semble qu’elle revêt toujours et partout deux formes, l’une morale, affective, voire magique, l’autre purement intellectuelle et rationnelle. La première est initiation, la seconde information:

\[
\text{Education} = \text{initiation} + \text{information}.^{20}
\]

In *Le Vent Paraclet*, Tournier goes on to make the following observation: ‘Or il me semble justement que nous assistons dans l’histoire de l’éducation à une diminution progressive de la part d’initiation face à une information envahissante, et cela à un point qui est devenu depuis longtemps néfaste’ (p.58), a point of view which Constant also appears to share. Indeed, in *Un Monde à l’usage des demoiselles*, rather than prime importance being attached to the acquisition of (intellectual) knowledge, as is generally the case today, the principal aim of the education of the demoiselles is to form and prepare the individual for the role she is destined to assume, given her social status and sex (p.18). For the demoiselles, that role is either a religious one or the social one of wife and mother (p.339).

Even though the world of the demoiselles evoked by Constant, in which the girls are educated by women, is based on a maternal model, inside as well as outside the convent walls it is the spiritual (educational) qualities of maternity which are valued, rather than the biological or the emotional (p.13). In the aristocratic circles under discussion, babies were fed and cared for by wet-nurses, and the responsibilities for the daily care of small children were assumed by a host of servants (pp.97-101). Education rehearses various aspects of the girls’ life to come, and as such prepares them for – and protects them, like a vaccine, against – the world outside: ‘on inocule la Demoiselle pour provoquer en elle un système de défense dont elle aura l’usage lorsqu’elle fera enfin son
entrée dans le monde’ (p.38). In the convents and educational establishments which
Constant describes, girls are isolated and protected from the world, yet prepared for their
place in it.

As Constant concedes, however, the demoiselles do not meet the identification
needs of most contemporary women, whose lifestyle, values and desires have little in
common with the limited choice of roles open to the eighteenth-century girls, with the
aristocratic society of which these latter are a part, or, indeed, with qualities such as
saintliness and virginity (p.34), fragility (p.43) and obedience (p.62), which were among
those most highly valued. Furthermore, ‘la distinction, l’individualisme, l’originalité font
horreur’ (p.233): exercises in reading, writing and dance were practised, not to encourage
the expression of individuality and originality as they are in most modern forms of
education, but rather, to initiate the demoiselles into the social roles that their station
demanded of them. Reading took the form of reading aloud, and rather than a route to
gaining knowledge was a vocal performance. Reciting the words and rhythms of the
Latin texts was more important than understanding meaning and it engendered a sense of
belonging to the (Christian and educational) community (p.247). Writing was a
disciplined ‘danse gymnique’, a strictly controlled positioning of the body, a formalised
exercise in copying and recopying letters, words and extracts of texts (p.277). Dance was
a necessary social skill and a socialising practice; it conformed to strict social etiquette
and reflected both the sexual and social hierarchies of the nobility (p.315).

Girls were educated to fit into a mould, to conform to a given set of rules, and to
live according to a rigid sense of order (pp.90-91). Study and the acquisition of
knowledge played its part in the girls’ education, but this was not to be flaunted: ‘Le
premier conseil que l’on donne aux filles, que l’on répète d’un bout à l’autre de leur
histoire, c'est d'ètre savantes mais en affectant de ne l’être pas’ (p.231). This advice echoes Laclos’s ‘Des Femmes et de leur éducation’: women should not show off their education – of primary importance is that they should be happy in the place in society destined for them.  

Although this form of education may appear simply to reproduce and to reinforce the status quo of the elite society of which the demoiselles were a part, Constant argues that the rejection of this world is implicit in the girls’ education and is transmitted by it: ‘toute éducation porte en soi la haine du monde; tous les éducateurs – religieux ou religieuses, femmes retirées ou marginales – sont sortis du monde, pour éduquer en dehors du monde, et contre le monde, la part la plus précieuse de l’humanité’ (Un Monde, p.329). In order to become teachers, those who educated the demoiselles had to withdraw from the world. While this may be seen as a sacrifice to the vocation of teaching, Constant suggests that for many women their exile was desired and that it expressed ‘un double refus du monde’: the rejection both of a society which did not conform to Christian moral values and of a patriarchal society in which women had no place of power or influence. Men were not simply excluded from this educational world of women; they were also denigrated as: ‘vils, barbares, intrigants, destructeurs, menteurs, scélérats, violents, cruels, mauvais, méchants, corrompus...’ (Un Monde, p.335).

In Un Monde à l’usage des demoiselles, Constant thus exposes a feminine tradition which considered men as dangerous to women, and which, she maintains, was transmitted through women-to-women education. The demoiselles were prepared for their social position and, at the same time, taught how to live ‘entre les pièges des hommes et les traquenards de la société’ (p.15). They were thus educated apart from, but for – and also against – the society in which they would live, and they would consequently go into
that society with ‘une extraordinaire méfiance du monde’. The (convent) wall takes on immense symbolisation, protecting and separating the girls from the world, and their education provides them with their own ‘petite muraille personnelle’ that they subsequently carry around with them: ‘les yeux baissés, la bouche close, le pas rapide, l’air d’aller dans une direction très précise’ – their demeanour is their personal protection (Un Monde, pp.71-72).

According to Constant in Un Monde à l’usage des demoiselles, contemporary feminist work has neglected the initiatory aspects of women’s education of the past, and has therefore cut modern women off from the history of a valuable radical struggle, albeit a Christian, sexist and elitist one (p.361). Although Constant defends her study and her valorisation of this feminine education against accusations of pure nostalgia, of idealising the past (p.362), the problematics of the socio-historical context of the demoiselles remain. Moreover, while it may be possible to consider teachers as subversive for teaching against the world as it was, they did not – and could not – change that world. They could, however (and according to Constant they did) transmit alternative values to their pupils, who would become mothers and/or teachers themselves. Constant’s main point, however, is that, with the modern democratisation of society, contemporary women have lost the tradition of women-to-women initiatory education, such as that of the demoiselles. The education of girls in contemporary society is based on instruction rather than initiation; girls become women with more intellectual knowledge and with wider horizons, rights and opportunities than in the past, but perhaps they are ‘brutalement livrées’ (Un Monde, p.38), ill-prepared practically and psychologically for the positions they will assume and the relationships in which they will be involved as women in society.
Constant’s research for *Un Monde à l’usage des demoiselles* re-surfaces in *Le Grand Ghâpal*, a fictional account of the education of Emilie-Gabrielle, a *demoiselle*.\(^{24}\)

*Le Grand Ghâpal* is a comic novel, with stylised characters such as the provincial Demoiselle de Paris. This character’s ‘pantomime extraordinaire’ is her own exaggerated version of Parisian courtly mannerisms which another character, Julie, recently come from Paris, interprets as a strange local ritual (p. 159). Absurdities abound: a three-year old Abbess walks on stilts in order to appear old enough to be ordained (p. 51); the heart of a dead Abbess together with her jewel of office, *le Grand Ghâpal*, is relegated to a toy box (p. 165); a falcon is afraid of chickens (p. 169). However, far from precluding a discussion about relationships in this novel, the caricatural nature of the characters facilitates such an approach, since relational aspects are precisely exaggerated and foregrounded.

During the period of the novel, Emilie-Gabrielle’s sense of her own identity is linked in different ways to her relationships with four women: her mother, her nurse, Sophie-Victoire (her aunt), and Julie (a friend). In contrast to the importance attached to the child’s relationship with the mother in much contemporary thinking, Emilie-Gabrielle’s relationship with her (biological) mother is backgrounded, being supplemented, first by her relations with her nurse, and then with Sophie-Victoire. In no sense does her mother provide a model with which the forceful and precocious Emilie-Gabrielle can identify: the former is empty-headed, neurotic and incapable, relying on her servant even to do the embroidery on which her meagre reputation rests (p. 18).

Emilie-Gabrielle, at seven years old fully conscious of her family’s heritage and status, has no respect, only contempt, for her mother, and the first of the three wishes granted to her on her seventh birthday is her desire to live
separately from her (p.25). If Emilie-Gabrielle’s mother contributes to her daughter’s sense of identity, it is in a negative way: indeed, Emilie-Gabrielle identifies herself with her father’s family – against her mother (pp.14-15).

The nurse is Emilie-Gabrielle’s prime carer in her early years (and again after the death of Sophie-Victoire). Although she responds to the little girl’s infantile needs (to suckle, to vent her anger and yet have it contained, to be violent, to be comforted), she does not offer a model to identify with. In Le Grand Gâpal, neither the mother nor the nurse have any status as subjects. Emilie-Gabrielle’s mother has no identity apart from her reproductive capability; indeed her husband has no more respect or affection for his wife than does Emilie-Gabrielle, who, on her departure for Paris, does not even think to say goodbye to her mother. The nurse is reduced to her functions, to ‘cet état de femme-bête’ (Un Monde, p.98), as an animal (Le Grand Gâpal, p.19) and as an object to be used (p.30). She has no identity of her own, and later, absurdly muzzled and ignored, she even misses the times when she was beaten by Emilie-Gabrielle since then she was also desired (p.61).

Emilie-Gabrielle’s principal female relationship is with her aunt, Sophie-Victoire, the only one of the three mother-figures in this novel to have a separate (professional and sexual) identity as a woman. Emilie-Gabrielle is to live with, and be educated by, her aunt and, following the family tradition, to succeed her as a powerful and influential Abbess. Sophie-Victoire provides Emilie-Gabrielle with not only a spiritual, intellectual and initiatory education, but also a physical, emotional and intellectual relationship. Moreover, she also furnishes her niece with a heritage and a future role, based on a female genealogy.
The female genealogy in *Le Grand Ghâpal* does not rest on biological maternity although it does in other respects conform to a maternal model: the narration identifies 'la passion d’enfanter' and 'une rage de maternité' in the portraits of past Abbesses (p.52) and Sophie-Victoire is relieved that Emilie-Gabrielle's arrival means that she is not sterile (p.36). Indeed, to both aunt and niece, the relationship is one of mother and daughter. Comparisons with the Christian divine genealogy are implicit in Constant's novel, since the Abbess acts as a model for a portrait of the Virgin Mary. A wholly female couple is thus promoted in opposition to the Christian mother-son dyad. Moreover, the aunt-niece configuration of the mother-daughter relationship in *Le Grand Ghâpal*, gives a different meaning to the term 'Virgin Mother'. Constant's formulation is all the more subversive perhaps because it does not necessarily impose virginity on the individual women.

In Sophie-Victoire, Emilie-Gabrielle finds 'celle qui me fera' and whom she calls 'ma mère' (p.36), a woman who educates her to distrust the ways of the world (p.67), to understand the pleasures as well as the perils of sexual relationships with men (p.66), who answers her questions (p.67), inspires her passion (p.96), and who offers her not only a model with whom to identify, but also a close emotional and bodily relationship. Sophie-Victoire and Emilie-Gabrielle are constantly together, 'côte à côte' (p.62), 'les doigts liés' (p.112), even sleeping in the same bed (p.40).

In turn, Emilie-Gabrielle is for Sophie-Victoire 'ange' and 'amour' (p.38), the 'daughter' she desires, her beauty and intelligence making her a worthy successor to the position of Abbess (pp.35-36). The intensely physical relationship between them is rejuvenating for Sophie-Victoire and it replaces her sexual desire for men. However, it is primarily narcissistic: 'mes lèvres se posent sur les vôtres non par désir, mais par
concordance’ (p.101). She maintains that it is their similarity that inspires her passion rather than (erotic) desire for an/other. Emilie-Gabrielle provides Sophie-Victoire with a younger, desirable reflection of herself. This affectionate and physical relationship (whether it is sexual or ‘motherly/daughterly’ jouissance) between the aunt and niece is considered by Sophie-Victoire to be a fundamental element of Emilie-Gabrielle’s upbringing (p.87).

In *Le Grand Ghâpal*, the education Emilie-Gabrielle receives at the hands of Sophie-Victoire is far removed from the banalising process that is meted out to other girls at the adjacent pensionnat (p.84). Emilie-Gabrielle is destined for la sainteté — although Sophie-Victoire’s version of sainthood seemingly differs from traditional perceptions of the term:

> Je veux pour ma petite enfant une sainteté toute neuve, une sainteté unique, telle qu’elle n’a jamais été vue et qu’après elle on ne la verra jamais, je la veux la plus sainte de nos saints pour que dans notre famille, désormais, les suppliques et les intercessions ne passent que par elle, pour que sur la terre entière, son double prénom remplaçant tous les autres, les petites filles jusqu’à la fin des siècles s’appellent toutes Emilie-Gabrielle, et glissent entre les pages de leur missel son portrait que je ferai peindre dans une pluie de roses. (p.131)

Rejecting sainthood for herself in favour of martyrdom (p.132), Sophie-Victoire appears to envisage Emilie-Gabrielle ultimately replacing the Virgin Mary in the feminine saintly hierarchy as a symbol of women’s identity, and thus going much further than her own usurpation of the representation of Mary in the painting of the Assumption, for which she was model and which hangs in the convent chapel (p.38). The difference between representation and symbol is important here. It may seem subversive that the girls of the pensionnat pray daily to a recognisable portrait of the Abbess, but it does not alter the fact that Mary is the figure to whom their devotions are directed. Sophie-Victoire has not replaced the Virgin Mary as a religious symbol, she is simply a representation of her.
However, her plans for Emilie-Gabrielle are manifestly and more fundamentally subversive: Emilie-Gabrielle is to be the most venerated female religious figure of the future, thus taking over Mary’s symbolic place and role. Irigaray’s stress on the importance of the divine to the cultural imaginary and to identity is pertinent to this scenario; so too is Kristeva’s critique of the cult of the Virgin Mary for contemporary women. Sophie-Victoire appears to envisage the possibility of a transformation of religious symbolism within the existing theological framework.

In contrast to their glorification in the cult of the Virgin Mary, virginity and chastity do not figure in Sophie-Victoire’s version of this ‘sage et douce et tendre sainte’ whom she hopes to create (p.131). Indeed in *Le Grand Ghâpal*, the fulfilment of desire and of bodily pleasures (sexual or otherwise) is not excluded from the future Abbess’s experience, neither is it limited to the relationship between aunt and niece. Emilie-Gabrielle’s romantic interlude with the ridiculous M. de Tancrède is encouraged by Sophie-Victoire as an initiatory experience. In this way, Emilie-Gabrielle’s sexual, sensual and romantic initiation does not limit her to any particular interpretation of sexuality. Rather it makes sexuality and sensuality *per se* part of her experience. As such, it differs from her friend Julie’s sexuality which is resoundingly heterosexual and lived within both oriental and occidental patriarchal frameworks. On the other hand, however, Sophie-Victoire favours intelligence, elegance, gentleness and social graces, and she explicitly rejects for Emilie-Gabrielle an alternative, women-centred, but aggressive, model of identity, the Amazon.

Emilie-Gabrielle is eventually separated from her close relationship with Sophie-Victoire, first by her seduction by M. de Tancrède’s romantic clichés, and then by her aunt’s death in a political *coup*.
L'idée qu'elle était morte l'envahit tout entière, l'idée que cette mort serait éternelle, la privant à tout jamais malgré les promesses du ciel des baisers adorables, des lèvres adorables, du sourire adorable, du parfum adorable, de la voix adorable, du corps adorable, de l'esprit adorable, de l'âme adorable, des gestes adorables de Sophie-Victoire... (p. 152)

In contrast to her indifferent reaction to the earlier death of her own mother (p. 62), following Sophie-Victoire's death Emilie-Gabrielle is overwhelmed by an immense sense of loss. She subsequently regresses to a state of infancy, even removing her nurse's muzzle so that, at the age of fifteen, she can once again suckle her 'troisième téton', her pendulous lower lip (p. 17). Emilie-Gabrielle loses her memory; she can no longer feel any emotion or even speak, and she loses all sense of her own identity. When her memory returns, it brings with it only pain, and later, in the melancholic state in which she is left, she is 'demi morte, car si le corps bouge et la tête fonctionne, l'intérieur a fondu dans l'incendie du couvent et mon âme est partie avec celle de l'Abbesse' (p. 195).

It is as though she has died inside. She has lost all sense of her inner self.

In Le Grand Ghâpal, Emilie-Gabrielle’s last female relationship is with Julie, who literally and symbolically breaches the convent wall, first revealing to Emilie-Gabrielle the temptations of worldly happiness (p. 82), and then, later, the pain of worldly suffering (pp. 185-90). For Sophie-Victoire, Julie represents a threat to Emilie-Gabrielle’s education, and she sends her away, but, after Sophie-Victoire’s death, it is Julie’s story of her experiences of pleasure, suffering and despair which ironically leads Emilie-Gabrielle (back) to her heritage – and to a certain kind of sainteté.

Publicly rejected and humiliated by her lover, Julie has no future in society, nor, despite Emilie-Gabrielle’s suggestion of its positive aspects, does she wish to withdraw to a convent. Julie’s death by suicide is therefore conceived by the two women as an ultimate revolt against society and against religion (p. 192). In the rivalry which follows
between Le Confesseur and Le Panégyriste, both of whom are determined to produce a saint of their own, it would seem that both Julie and Emilie-Gabrielle use each other in order to achieve their respective destinies. In doing so, they also take their revenge on the men who have vested interests in their sainthood. The women’s relationship of mutual manipulation is thus also one of mutual engendering. Julie initially sees Emilie-Gabrielle as a protector who would provide her with a way back into the duplicitous world of social relations which stimulate her, but finally she accedes to a different, if unforeseen, identity. ‘En abbesse’ and wearing Emilie-Gabrielle’s abbatial jewel, *le Grand Ghâpal* (p.199), Julie, in a theatrical and painful death, dies, absurdly, a saint, according to Le Panégyriste – accompanied by Emilie-Gabrielle’s simultaneous accession to joy as, in the words of Le Confesseur, ‘Madame ici met au monde sa petite sainteté!’ (p.202).

However, despite the claims of both men, the outcome of Emilie-Gabrielle’s Manichean struggle between ‘la sainteté’ and ‘l’enfer’, between ‘un Ange’ and ‘le Diable’, between Julie’s suffering and Satan’s entreaties, is not made clear to the reader. On the one hand, it is certainly debatable whether Emilie-Gabrielle’s part in Julie’s death is purely altruistic. The early violent treatment and later muzzling of her nurse, and, on Sophie-Victoire’s death, her intoxication by the colour of the blood (p.143), the internal organs (p.146) and the warmth of the heart she holds in her hands (p.147), suggest a certain sadomasochistic element. On the other hand, Emilie-Gabrielle has been educated both in and against the ways of the world, and her own machinations around Julie’s death suggest an awareness of, and a reaction to, both the other woman’s and the men’s manipulations. Moreover, Emilie-Gabrielle loses her faith along with her memory (p.162), she gives away the mystical and mythical *Grand Ghâpal* as if it were a bauble (p.198), and declares that she is prepared to give up her soul for Julie (p.199).
Whether we think, therefore, that Emilie-Gabrielle’s ultimate ‘joie’ arises from Julie’s suffering or from her salvation, from her own resistance or from her surrender to the Devil, both she and Julie appear to escape from the control of Le Panégyriste and Le Confesseur. In both cases, the men’s interest in the women’s respective sainthood is concerned with assuaging their own guilt. It is a justifying measure and can be seen in terms of male control over women – control of their sexuality and of their actions. Le Panégyriste’s role is to observe and record. However, his objectivity is shown to be subjective as he brings (male) order to (female/feminine) chaos (see p.40). Moreover, he is seduced by Julie’s all too worldly physical charms (p. 183). Indeed, far from remaining an observer, he becomes a protagonist. For Le Confesseur, the women’s sainthood provides a justification for the troubling matter of the blasphemous and heretical nature of Julie’s death, whether, ultimately, that be by suicide or murder (p.199). Thus in Le Grand Ghâpal, it becomes clear that the very notion of saintté is open to (subjective) interpretation, invested as it is with the personal interests of the different characters. Although the women’s saintly identity ultimately rests on the word of the men in their society, whatever version of saintté the men claim for the women, their interpretations must be treated with scepticism. In a similar way, Sophie-Victoire’s identity as a martyr is ensured by the political interests of Le Cardinal despite his involvement in the coup in which she was killed (p.164). In Sophie-Victoire’s case, like that of Emilie-Gabrielle which it thus pre-figures, the religious (men’s) interpretation is explicitly at odds with the narration. Sophie-Victoire’s last words: ‘Dieu éclate dans mon coeur comme une pluie d’étoiles’ betray a loss of faith (p.144), and the fire which consumes the Abbey and the body of the Abbess is described as ‘l’enfer’ (p.147). The undecidability of the ending of Le Grand Ghâpal thus leaves the readers themselves to speculate on the nature of Emilie-
Gabrielle’s joy, on possible interpretations of the sainthood she acquires, and, in the
light of Sophie-Victoire’s ambitions for her, on the heretical possibilities of this ‘sainteté
toute neuve’ which the latter sees as providing a spiritual model and an appellational
identity for future generations of little girls (p.131).

Indeed, the ambiguity of the ending of Le Grand Ghâpal encapsulates the problems
that face its readers, namely how to read this comic novel and where to position oneself
as reader in relation to it. As discussed in Chapter 3, in Constant’s ‘Tiffany’ novels and in
La Fille du Gobemator, the reader is positioned close to the little girls, in order to be able
to share something of their experience. On the contrary, the readers of Le Grand Ghâpal
are kept at a distance by the narrative style which draws them along past a surreal
succession of improbable episodes and unrealistic characters and thus virtually precludes
any readily assumable reader sympathy or identification. Furthermore, real and invented
intertextual references destabilise reader positioning: imaginary works of art, such as
‘L’Enfant trouvé’, ‘La Fille prodigue’ (p.35) co-exist with Emilie-Gabrielle’s reading of
real texts like Ovide’s L’Art d’aimer and Les Métamorphoses, or Racine’s Esther. Such
real textual references are juxtaposed with the story of the (fictional) Princesse de Clèves
who, in the Le Grand Ghâpal, is said to have stayed at the convent after the events in
Mme. de La Fayette’s novel, La Princesse de Clèves, and to have subsequently written
that novel under a pseudonym (pp.64-65). Moreover, Sophie-Victoire talks to her mirror
like the step-mother in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (pp.128-32). The mixture of
reality and fiction is humorous but unsettling, since it challenges what the reader (thinks
s/he) knows.

The question remains as to whether Emilie-Gabrielle’s education can be considered
primarily in positive or negative terms. Constant’s point in Un Monde à l’usage des
demoiselles is that, despite the alienating gulf between the values of a past aristocratic society and those of the societies in which the majority of her twentieth-century readers live, the value of the initiatory aspect of the demoiselles’ education by women is that it prepares them and arms them – enables them – to assume their social roles. The humour of Constant’s Le Grand Ghâpal highlights the revolt behind Emilie-Gabrielle’s sainthood as much as it reveals hypocrisy and self-interest. On the way to assuming the role destined for her, she is tempted by worldly happiness, seduced by the clichés of romantic love, regresses to childhood, risks becoming a simpleton like her mother, and loses her faith. Through Julie’s death, Emilie-Gabrielle finds again a sense of self, an older (reborn – resurrected) version of the ambitious, manipulative, individual girl of her childhood whom her education does not destroy. While outwardly fulfilling her role and living out her destiny, she can withdraw behind her own symbolic convent wall (her sainthood), not as a sacrifice, nor a punishment, nor even an escape, but as a positive choice. She may have to rely on the men in her society to confirm her position, but Emilie-Gabrielle does not necessarily capitulate to their desires or compromise her independence. She can live the identity destined for her in her own way – as a believer or as a heretic.

By means of its variety of comic effects, Le Grand Ghâpal suggests to its twentieth-century (post-feminist) readers that they might do well to think again about women-to-women education. Although reading Constant’s Tiffany novels can alert women to the part adult women themselves play in the silencing of girls’ voices in society (see my Chapter 3), Le Grand Ghâpal, like Constant’s essay, Un Monde à l’usage des demoiselles, suggests that to re-value the initiatory aspects of women’s education by women is also to re-value a variety of women-to-women relations – and to value what women as women can be and do, not only for themselves, but also for each other.
A wealth of different maternal relationships figure in Baroche's novels, but, in many cases, these do not necessarily involve biological motherhood. In *L'Hiver de beauté*, Isabelle, on her sister's death, becomes a 'mother' to her nephew, Colin, and Hendrickje mothers Isabelle as much as her own daughter; in *Les Ports du silence*, Jaime is brought up by his aunt, Adeline, and Flore's 'maternal' 'air à fondre' for Jaime's daughter is visibly obvious for all to see (p.266). Moreover, it is not only women who are involved in 'surrogate' or adoptive parenting arrangements: for example, in *Les Ports du silence*, Basile loves and cares for Elodie as if he were her father, in *La Rage au bois dormant*, Bernard and François are Judith's *chosen* family, and these two men in turn become responsible for the 'maternage' of Judith's son, Emmanuel (p.249).

In contrast to positive non-biological configurations of parenting, a number of deeply negative biological relationships are portrayed in Baroche's novels: in *La Rage au bois dormant*, Judith's rejection by her father marks her for life; similarly, in *L'Hiver de beauté*, Isabelle, 'le rêve déçu de mon père' since she is not the son he desires (p.20), reveals how her father has sacrificed her happiness to financial considerations and to his own greed and ambitions; and, in the same novel, Queria, rejected by her parents because of her deformity, is left with feelings of hatred towards them both. Mother-daughter relationships fare only slightly better. In *La Rage au bois dormant*, for example, Adèle condemns her daughter, Josépha, as 'une emmerdeuse' (p.227), only later recognising her own part in their problematical relationship. In turn, she criticises her mother for her own upbringing, in which the high value attached to appearances turns her into a sexual object, leaving her with no horizons other than the marriage her mother dreamt of for her.
– or the prostitution which is, ironically, the route she takes. In *Les Ports du silence*, Elodie’s relationship with her mother is one of mutual hate, and Madeleine, in *L’Hiver de beauté*, bemoans the fact that neither of her parents loved her. Less negative are the mother-daughter relationships experienced by Isabelle in the latter novel and by Judith in *La Rage au bois dormant*. Both women speak of their mothers with some affection, but no positive significance is attributed to these relationships. Judith and Isabelle are both active, vital women, and their pale, passive mothers do not seem to provide them with strong or desirable models of identity.

Outside the immediate mother-daughter configuration, other women-to-women relations are developed and these offer some interesting material for discussion in connection with identity. Relationships such as the friendship between Adèle and Judith in *La Rage au bois dormant* discussed in Chapter 3 are experienced in different ways by the two women according to their (intermittent) needs. Ultimately, in the women’s old age, this friendship becomes a mutual ‘compagnonnage’. In *L’Hiver de beauté*, however, sisterhood is the dominant paradigm of productive women-to-women relations and this section’s discussion is based on the notion of ‘une sororité efficace’ which Queria identifies among the eighteenth-century women in this novel (p. 142).

The sisterhood to which Queria refers is not a utopian one, despite its connotations of a feminist ideal. It accommodates ambivalent feelings and the expression of anger, and indeed, the term itself (‘une sororité efficace’; my stress) emphasises its practical (efficient and efficacious) nature. In *L’Hiver de beauté*, the community of women in which Isabelle finds herself on her return to Rotterdam includes Madeleine (her sister), Hendrickje, (her servant/housekeeper), Hendrickje’s daughter, Anneke, and also Elise (a servant). From reading the letters and diaries of the eighteenth-century women, Queria
realises that, although their current separatism from men is enforced, since their husbands are away at sea, these women are necessarily active and independent of men; whether they are at home or away, the men do not involve themselves in the day-to-day realities of life that the women can never forget, such as daily chores, food preparation, child-birth and child-care (p.143). The equivalence of passivity with femininity (and women) and activity with masculinity (and men) is thus called into question in this novel as it is elsewhere in Baroche’s work.\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, in \textit{L’Hiver de beauté}, it is the realities of women’s daily lives that are foregrounded rather than the events of the major political upheaval of the French Revolution – which are played out in the background throughout the novel, and which in conventional ‘History’ are valued as the more interesting.

The relationships that the eighteenth-century women establish of mutual support and respect, companionship and (physical) affection provide some of the most emotive episodes of the novel. Isabelle, shaken to the very core of her identity by the loss of her beauty, financial security and social respectability, receives acceptance, care, ‘maternal’ caresses and love – irrespective of her disfigurement – from Hendrickje, who, in turn, also fulfils her own needs – to be needed. Hendrickje’s husband is away at sea and her children are grown up and no longer need her as they did when they were young. Instead Hendrickje bestows her care and affection on Isabelle, whom, she tells herself, does have need of her (p.61). Although Hendrickje’s attentions are not always welcome (p.59), Isabelle appreciates her care: ‘depuis que je suis née, c’est la première personne qui n’attend rien de moi et qui donne malgré tout’ (p.31). In Isabelle’s past experience – in the cynical French court society of which, as Mme. de Merteuil, she was a part – nothing is given without the expectation of receiving something in return but Hendrickje gives in response to her own perceptions of Isabelle’s needs. Her affection is not wholly
unconditional, however, since it is through the act of giving to Isabelle that Hendrickje confirms her own identity. Isabelle nonetheless grows fond of her servant and accepts that Hendrickje needs someone to love.

In *L’Hiver de beauté*, Hendrickje and Isabelle transcend the social divisions between them as they chat on the doorstep while emptying pails of water (p. 33), visit Madeleine daily during her pregnancy (p. 69), and together wash the dead body of Minna, who is both Madeleine’s mother-in-law and the ‘soeur de lait’ of Hendrickje’s mother (p. 219). Hendrickje rounds up a body of women and children armed with sticks and stones to support Isabelle in a confrontation with Hector (pp. 80-82), and she cries with emotion as she listens to Isabelle sing (p. 61). Together the group of women deal with the crises of birth and of death, alternating between the emotional and the practical as Anneke’s baby, Willem, dies from croup. Anneke blames Isabelle’s ‘sale oeil’ for her baby’s death (p. 141), but the tension between them is later resolved as Isabelle gives the young woman both affection and respect, caressing her, confiding her memories and her love for Armand-Marie, and naming her as Colin’s godmother (pp. 171-72). Together the women deal with the threat of invading French soldiers, and together they embark on the long voyage to the New World, ‘soeurs malignes, entremetteuses’, active participants in the new beginning to the love affair between Isabelle and Armand-Marie with which Queria ends her version of Isabelle’s story (p. 319).

The sisterhood the women establish thus works practically and emotionally to help them deal with both the trivial and the tragic events in their lives. For Isabelle, it is a process of healing, recuperation, nourishment and rebirth, during which she is physically and psychologically able to heal from the smallpox by developing enriching mutual relationships with other women, away from the judgement and evaluation of men. This
sisterhood is in stark contrast to the superficially respectable but manipulative
relationships that Isabelle’s canonical forerunner (Laclos’s Mme. de Merteuil) has with
other women. While this latter character may have taken the war of the sexes onto to her
own shoulders (in Letter 81 of Les Liaisons dangereuses, she declares she is ‘née pour
venger mon sexe et maîtriser le vôtre’ [p.221]), she has little respect or time for other
women other than as a means to her own ends. Baroche’s Isabelle, in contrast, comes to
respect the other women as individuals irrespective of social class or situation.
Furthermore, in this women-centred environment, she is able to find herself as an
individual and begin to reconstruct her identity differently.

Perhaps the most surprising relationship to develop within Isabelle’s sororité
efficace is the one between Isabelle and her real (biological) sister, Madeleine. The two
women are gradually able to put aside the sibling rivalry and jealousy of their youth and
to become real sisters, literally and figuratively. In competition, first for the love of their
parents, and then for that of Armand-Marie, the sisters’ rivalry engenders fear and hatred
on Madeleine’s part (p.18) and contempt on Isabelle’s (pp.16-17). However, eventually
Madeleine begins to confide in Isabelle, to share with her the joys and concerns of her
pregnancy, and in turn, Isabelle, realising that ‘nous sommes soeurs, voilà tout’ (p.53),
comes to love her sister.

In the shadow of the memory of their mother’s death in childbirth, Isabelle
overcomes both her fear and the difficulties and dangers of a breech birth to deliver and
save Madeleine’s baby. Moreover, in one of the most memorable and most extreme
demonstrations of sisterly love imaginable, she is even able to give her dying sister the
fulfilment she desires by suckling her poisoned milk (pp.98-107). In ‘Le Chant de la
sirène’, Michael Worton describes this latter gesture of Isabelle’s as ‘incestueux et
scandaleux’ but also as ‘la plus grande preuve d’amour sororal qu’elle puisse donner’ (p.80). Losing a violent and tortured struggle in the throes of a puerperal fever, Madeleine’s dying wish is to hold and feed her baby, Colin, but there is no time to fetch him and also her milk makes him ill. Breast-feeding for women can be (although it is not always) a source of maternal jouissance for its skin-to-skin bodily closeness and intimacy with an/other (the baby), as well as for the sensations of the baby suckling and the milk flowing. By her action, Isabelle thus enables Madeleine to experience these maternal pleasures and, if only fleetingly, to be a mother in the way she wants to be. Although Madeleine recognises that it is Isabelle and not Colin suckling her milk and caressing her, she is finally able to die peacefully, loved and comforted by her sister – the person she knows best.

In L’Hiver de beauté, Isabelle’s gift of motherhood to her sister is thus truly generous, but her act is reciprocated. Madeleine’s bitter, poisonous milk recalls to Isabelle ‘[des] eaux mauvaises à boire, et qui pourtant délivrent, baptisent’, other bad-tasting but regenerative liquids – the medicines prescribed for the small-pox, Hector’s sweat when he raped her, the saliva of men she did not love (p.107). Madeleine’s milk has maternal, life-giving properties. Isabelle is symbolically nourished and (re)born. Madeleine’s death coincides not only with Colin’s birth but also with Isabelle’s symbolic return to life as a (potentially procreative) woman: on the day that Madeleine dies, Isabelle menstruates for the first time since her illness (p.107).

Despite the evident generosity on the part of Isabelle, this unusual episode may present some difficulties for the reader, since Baroche’s very realism problematises the symbolic nature of this (fictional) reciprocal sisterly exchange. The slippage between narrative levels and between reality and fiction in L’Hiver de beauté may have a
somewhat destabilising effect on the reader, but, above all, it calls attention to the nature of the text being read. It may be difficult for twentieth-century readers to read these intimate relations between two adult women in totally non-erotic terms, but in the text, Hendrickje sits at the foot of the bed ‘sans rien manifester’ (p. 107). Hendrickje is, apparently, neither shocked, nor embarrassed, nor (voyeuristically) sexually gratified; for her, there are no incestuous or lesbian undertones to the encounter. Moreover, the passages which recount the birth of Colin and the death of Madeleine constitute the first passages of Isabelle’s story to be narrated by an omniscient third person narrator. It is fair to assume that this forms part of Queria’s fictional account of Isabelle’s life, and as such, the episode is doubly textual. As a piece of fictional fiction, it thus, in itself, guides its readers away from a realist, and, therefore, in twentieth-century terms, erotic, interpretation of the event.

This episode highlights the distance that exists between the eighteenth-century and twentieth-century contexts which, however, interweave throughout Baroche’s novel and of which her readers have to take account. The exchange between historical contexts is, nevertheless, productive, and from the non-erotic yet intimately physical and emotional nature of the two sisters’ encounter, the reader comes to understand, with Queria, how far the twentieth-century sexualisation of human relationships disallows non-sexual affection between people. Physical contact in Western society has been so sexualised that physical affection between individuals is imbued with erotic connotations and (af)fixed with labels of sexuality. Queria’s interest in the eighteenth-century sisterhood and her subsequent understanding that physical affection between the women is not erotic but a mutual exchange of comfort, warmth and tenderness, helps her to overcome her initial suspicion of ‘tout ce qui est gynécée’, her resistance to women in groups (p. 157). She is thus able to
modify her initial reaction to the physical contact between a group of contemporary women, Hélène, Pauline and Rachel, who befriend her. The dynamics of affection between these three women are complex — sisterhood and friendship, with undercurrents of motherhood and lesbianism. Rachel and Pauline are sisters, and Hélène is an old school friend. Pauline has a penchant for ‘des jolis corps de femmes’ (p.174) and Rachel admits her ambivalence to both Pauline’s and Hélène’s mothering of her (p.165).

However, in these relations Queria recognises more parallels with, than differences from, the relations between Isabelle, Hendrickje, Elise and Anneke. She is subsequently able to trust Hélène, Rachel and Pauline, to recognise their different interests in her, to accept their friendship, and thus to make a fundamental decision about her life: Pauline is a surgeon and carries out the reconstructive surgery on Queria’s face.

In *L’Hiver de beauté*, the relationship between Queria and her eighteenth-century ancestor, Isabelle, is a two-way one. Queria appeals to Isabelle for inspiration to help her develop her relationship with Barney: ‘Isabelle, aide-moi, j’aime cet homme et je n’ai pas l’habitude’ (p.253); in turn her own voice encourages Isabelle’s dealings with Armand-Marie: ‘N’oublie pas tes tours, marquise, finalement même un oeil crevé ne faisait pas l’hiver d’une femme’ (p.299); and the Isabelle who disfigures Hector with the pizzle used by her father to flog his dogs (p.97) is surely there in Queria’s own sisterly act for an unknown woman, when, on her way to meet Barney, in the dying moments of the Brazilian carnival, she trips up two men and thus allows the naked woman they are pursuing to escape (p.287). Moreover, Queria and Isabelle each (textually) engender the other. As discussed in my Chapter 2, Queria-the-writer creates her own Isabelle, reconstructing her identity from the fragments which remain. In turn, through her reading of Isabelle’s letters and diaries, Queria is led to recreate her own identity. Queria’s
reading of the eighteenth-century women’s writing is politicising, comforting, empowering, constructive and performative. Through her reading, she ‘hears’ women’s voices, and ‘listens’ to their stories, but it is through their differences from her (historically, socially, culturally, economically), as well as through certain similarities that her reading is implicated in the choices she makes in her life, and in the way in which she subsequently perceives and identifies herself. Queria thus makes connections with a sisterhood of her own through reading – a sisterhood which has an important impact on her own identity.

Importantly, all the versions of sisterhood in L’Hiver de beauté are episodic. Isabelle moves away from the separatism of her sororité towards new relationships with men. Queria’s association with her three women friends is finite, as Rachel dies, Hélène retires, and Pauline’s interest in her wanes once she ceases to be an interesting medical ‘cas’, her reconstructive surgery completed (p.158). Queria goes her own way, embarking on a new relationship with Barney, but not before Pauline, acting as a kind of entremetteuse, alerts Barney to Queria’s need to be accepted as she was before her operation (p.280). In addition, Queria leaves Isabelle behind as she finishes her book: the last words of Baroche’s novel, where the twentieth-century and eighteenth-century narratives converge, the point where Isabelle is Queria, is also the point where Queria finally gains her independence from Isabelle and assumes her own (reconstructed) identity. Isabelle and Queria, both sujets en procès (desiring subjects as well as objects of desire) move between, and in and out of, individual and collective identities, their connections with their respective sisterhoods having a positive impact on their identities as individuals. There is a sense too that both women will continue to make (intermittent) connections with these collective identities: Isabelle is ‘mother’ to Colin,
and in this way, maintains her place in the women's community, but she is not enclosed by it; Queria is a twentieth-century woman, feminist thinking is part of her life, and she will surely read other women's writing. Their links with women's communities, and thus with a collective women's identity, in the form of 'une sororité efficace' do not seem to be merely a stage in their lives but an important, on-going – if intermittent – part of them.

For Baroche's (women) readers, the oscillation and exchange between eighteenth-century and twentieth-century sisterhoods, between textual and real ones, connects them to one of their own, and thus, through their reading, to a link with a collective (women's) identity. In this respect, therefore, both the term and the concept 'une sororité efficace' can be usefully employed to describe what reading women's writing can be for women as women: a political, intellectual and emotional experience, and one which supports, nourishes and enriches.

HELENE CIXOUS

Unlike Constant and Baroche, Cixous does not write realist fiction, and to discuss relations between women in her work therefore necessarily requires a different methodology. Notwithstanding the constant presence of the absent father which is at the heart of Cixous's oeuvre, in that the loss (death) of the father dominates, and indeed motivates, her writing, a variety of maternal figures proliferate throughout her texts. In *Dedans, Déluge,* and *Jours de l'an,* for example, the narrator refers in an apparently autobiographical fashion to her mother and grandmother, although apart from *Dedans* where they have a more central place, these references are rarely developed. In *Vivre l'Orange* and *Illa,* the writer, Clarice Lispector, fulfils an engendering and nourishing
role, and *Ilia* exemplifies the mythological mother, Demeter, for her loyalty, determination and heroism.\(^{36}\) Importantly, the inscription of the maternal extends to language itself – in the poetry of Cixous’s writing: first, by means of rhythm;\(^{37}\) and second, in the abundance of maternal metaphors which appear throughout her work expressing the process of artistic creation (writing). In the 1976 essay ‘La Venue à l’écriture’, the act of writing is described as pregnancy, giving birth, and breast-feeding (p.41). In fictional texts of the same period, the convergence of writing and women’s identity is generative: for example, ‘texte-mère et texte-enfant’ (*Souffles*, back cover) and ‘la jeune langue’ which is newly born (*La*, p.113). Cixous’s later fiction sees the continued employment of these metaphors: in *Jours de l’An*, for example, the words ‘grossesse’, ‘couve’, ‘accoucher’ ‘lait’ are used metaphorically with expressly declared connotations of maternal experiences which, the narrator suggests, cannot be shared by men (pp.30-31). In *Writing Differences*, Cixous clarifies this latter point in conversation:

> I could write a thesis on the theme of giving birth in texts by women, it would be fascinating. It’s a metaphor which comes easily to women, dictated by their experience. It’s a metaphor Clarice Lispector uses, it’s a metaphor I use. During childbirth a discovery is made inside the body. We can transpose the discovery, using it to understand moments in life which are analogous. A man will understand different things differently. Their bodies are sources of totally different images, transformations, expressions. (p.151)

Women, who have had the experience of giving birth, can use metaphors of maternity in a subjective way; men are unable to share that subjective experience. Nonetheless, in *Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu*, the creative male figure, ‘l’homme inexplicable’ is likened by the narrator to a woman in the giving, losing, joyful process of giving birth (p.132).\(^{38}\) Moreover, the creativity and sensitivity of this male figure is such that these qualities are associated with the immediacy of maternal responses to a breast-fed baby (p.131).
In this way, through the use of rhythm and metaphor, Cixous’s writing itself speaks the maternal. At times this tends to slide into an essentialist or universalistic position: ‘il y a de la mère en toute femme’ (‘La Venue’, p.61), ‘je suis née mère, comme toutes les filles’ (Le Livre de Promethea, p.150), ‘toutes les femmes connaissent cette douleur sans corps. Il y a dans notre ventre l’imperceptible trace d’un enfant qui ne s’est pas fait’ (L’Ange au secret, p.15). These statements may well alienate women who are not, do not want to be, or cannot be mothers. On the other hand, despite some persuasive criticism to the contrary, notably in Domna Stanton’s influential essay, ‘Difference on Trial’, Cixous’s metaphorical celebrations of the creativity of motherhood are distinguishable from the negativity associated with the procreative kind: ‘On t’attrape par les seins, on te plume le derrière, on te fout dans une cocotte, on te fait sauter au sperme, on t’attrape par le bec, on te met dans un foyer, on t’engraisse à l’huile conjugale, on t’enferme dans ta cage. Et maintenant, ponds’ (‘La Venue’, p.37).

Explicitly setting aside the socio-cultural arrangements which traditionally accompany women’s motherhood, in ‘La Venue à l’écriture’ Cixous’s maternal metaphors concentrate on the specific bodily experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding, to equate writing with the physical, psychological and emotional pleasures and pains of maternity. Nonetheless, it is important to note that in this text, as elsewhere, Cixous also uses sexual and eating metaphors for the process of writing; in all cases, the emphasis is on jouissance – on the intense pleasures (and pains) of writing.

Moreover, in ‘La Venue à l’écriture’, writing is self-generative: ‘Écrire, rêver, s’accoucher, être moi-même ma fille de chaque jour’ (p.14), and ‘Mère je suis fille’ (p.60). Writing is giving birth to oneself. Here as in ‘Sorties’ (La Jeune Née), the writing woman is herself (newly) born through her act of writing. In Cixous’s work, maternity
does not seem to be idealised for itself. Rather, it is used as a woman-centred inscription of women’s creativity. Nevertheless, perhaps Mary Daly’s solution to the problems of the alienating effects of a maternal model — to recognise the daughter in the self (and in the mother), since ‘clearly, all women are daughters’ — may offer a more widely acceptable way of reading Cixous’s metaphors of creativity. In this case, rather than giving birth, creation is the act of being born. Daughterhood, rather than motherhood, thus becomes the dominant figure of women’s creativity.

From the mid 1970s to the 1980s, Cixous’s texts inscribe a search for a new (feminine/female) writing subject, a subject to be found in and through writing, a subject of writing which could accommodate the multiplicity and the potentialities of women’s identity. In addition, as Susan Sellers points out in The Hélène Cixous Reader, there is, increasingly, a move towards exploring relationships with others (p. 121). In these terms, Cixous’s fictional text, Le Livre de Promethea, can be seen as a meeting of these trajectories: Promethea is at once the subject (source) of the writing, a subject who comes into being through the writing, and an/other in relation to the writer/narrator. In the complex negotiation between subjectivity and intersubjectivity in this text, women-to-women relations are explored through and in writing. Le Livre de Promethea will, therefore, provide the main focus of this section’s discussion.

In Le Livre de Promethea, two levels of relations between women are inscribed – lived reality and the textual. In the text, there is continual oscillation, coincidence and interchange between these two levels, and the reader must constantly negotiate the slippages between them as well as the slippage between the narrative figures: je is the narrator, ‘un auteur’ and ‘une femme’, but H and Promethea are the ‘deux vraies faiseuses’ (p. 12). Je – or the narrator/writer – is at times simply je and at other times split
between *je* and H: ‘*je m’étais réservé deux places dans le texte (afin de pouvoir me glisser sans cesse de l’une à l’autre)*’ (p.19). In this highly textual text, narrative uncertainty – the slippage between narrative figures and positions – is a declared technique which *je* believes will enable her to get close to H and Promethea, ‘*jusqu’à pouvoir épouser le contour de leurs âmes avec la mienne, sans cependant causer de confusion*’ (p.12). The aim appears to be to untangle the position of the writing subject from that of the subject of writing, to reveal their separate subjectivities, while maintaining the closeness between them; to write about an/other (Promethea) without making that subject of writing into an object, yet without conflating her with the writing subject (*je*), and thus losing them both. *Je* is writing a book of Promethea, but she sees this as a loving, although perhaps impossible, translation of the person (p.38); yet, above all, this is to be ‘*le livre de Promethea*’, Promethea’s book (p.21). Promethea is thus subject and not object of/in the book.41 *Je* espouses the narrative slippage in an effort to negotiate this difficult mutually engendering relationship between a (woman) writer and her (female) subject.

In *Le Livre de Promethea*, the writer’s anxiety is expressed repeatedly throughout the text. She is writing in order to approach Promethea, to get close to her (p.22), but she is afraid of betraying her (p.23) and reducing her by describing her (p.217).42 This must, therefore, be ‘*un livre entièrement au présent*’ (p.23). This means writing the presence of Promethea, which is opposed to writing about her in her absence (p.22). Absence renders a subject present only as an image, as an object (re)constituted by the intervention of the writer’s fantasies or memories. The writing must also be in the present (tense), as opposed to writing in or about the past (p.23), where memory comes into play to freeze, ‘*embaumer et oublier et raconter des histoires*’ (p.110). Memory is creative, comprising
recovery and reinterpretation, and to write about Promethea (in the past) – to write her story – would entail losing the vital presentness of her presence.

However, if the text overtly presents the writer's antagonistic struggle to write an/other, there is also something of a slippage between the desire for intersubjective textual relations and a certain intra-subjectivity. For je, who is also H, this is 'un livre entièrement intérieur' and Promethea is 'l'héroïne de ma vie, de mon imagination, de mon livre' (p.21). At times je confuses Promethea with herself (p.167), and indeed, Promethea comes into being in and through je/H's writing, 'divinis[ée]' (p.187), 'transfigur[ée]' (p.221) and 'invent[ée]' (p.245). The textual Promethea becomes what je/H wants her to be, and, perhaps, what she (je/H), herself, wants to be (pp.219-21).

Promethea is 'Liberté elle-même' for je, who, herself, is only 'assez libre pour pouvoir rêver de l'être' (pp.17-18). As a woman, je must repeatedly declare her womanhood in order to counter the perceived 'gynocide' of a patriarchal society, whereas Promethea is a woman without the need to say it. The figure of Promethea thus appears to anticipate a kind of Irigarayan post-(post-)feminist sexed society and culture in which women can play a full part without denying their womanhood, and yet without needing to assert it.43

Promethea is figured throughout the text in mythic terms. She is animalistic: a woman who is also 'une jument' (p.179), 'se transforme en aigle' (p.173), and 'la biche qui vient tout juste d'être métamorphosée en femme' (p.192).44 She is elemental: earth (p.32), fire (p.33), water (p.55) and the cosmos itself (p.180). She is connected with the mythology of different cultures: Moses (p.58), 'mon Amazone' (p.89), prelapsarian Paradise (p.106), and, 'en barque égyptienne', taking H to 'une Inde celeste' (p.173), Promethea is 'ingénieure de Rêve' (p.241). Indeed, the name Promethea in itself has mythical connotations as the feminised version of Prometheus but, as Martine Motard-
Noar points out in *Les Fictions d’Hélène Cixous*, the figure of Prometheus himself is multiple (p.63). In *The Greek Myths*, Robert Graves associates him with creation, fire, suffering and transgression (39), while Shelley’s ‘Prometheus Unbound’ also associates him with happiness. In ‘Paradise Refound’, Sarah Cornell notes that the name Promethea evokes ‘both the promise and the Promised land, as well as the Greek “divine goddess”, thea’ (p.140).\(^4\) Despite her mythic dimensions, however, Promethea is also mortal (p.150), and endowed with human qualities: ‘ainsi elle était aussi un être humain faible dévoré dévorable dévorant?’ (p.157). Loving and loved, dangerous and vulnerable, she can thus both hurt and be hurt.

In *Le Livre de Promethea*, one of *je*’s major writing anxieties is the difficulty of simultaneously being on two levels – ‘à l’intérieur et à l’extérieur’ (p.23). Her writing must come from within herself but she is also trying to write the reality of another, and, indeed, in this text, Promethea exists ‘pour sa propre histoire, en sa propre personne’ at the same time as she exists ‘du point de vue de l’infini’ (p.179). Promethea is a ‘real’ woman who goes shopping (p.143), goes to her exercise class (p.204) and does the cooking (p.217), as well as a textual and mythical one.\(^4\) There is no doubt that the relationship between Promethea and *je/H* is a loving one: *je* declares that she loves Promethea and knows that Promethea loves her, since the latter asks “‘est-ce que tu as bien dit que je t’aime?’” (p.126). Promethea wants her love for *je* to be inscribed in the text.

The loving relationship between the women in *Le Livre de Promethea* may be read as an erotic lesbian one but the nature of their love is not simply classifiable in this way since descriptions of physical relations slip between the literal and the figurative: for example, the apparently literally physical ‘dans ses bras contre sa poitrine’ slides into
figurative mode ‘le sang de Promethea était en train de passer par son coeur à elle’ (p.86). While physical intimacy may indeed lead to emotional intimacy such as this (and vice versa), in *Le Livre de Promethea* the physical is also used as a metaphor for the emotional: ‘Terribles douleurs qu’elles se causent parce que n’ont pas de peau. Organes nus. Des grandes brûlées d’amour. Chaque mot les fait crier.’ (p.83). Emotional intensity and vulnerability are described in bodily terms.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the women is inscribed in terms which are apparently erotic:

> Il s’agit de possession. 
> Tu m’arrives au fond. Entièrement. Toi tout entière et jusqu’aux entrailles de mon corps et jusqu’aux entrailles de mon âme, c’est ainsi. 
> Tu viens, et je te cède. Je ne peux pas ne pas te laisser entrer en moi, de toute ta présence large et chaude, et lentement tu entres dans la baie, avec tes pleines voiles qui m’emplissent d’un bord à l’autre, tu vas mouiller au fond de mon ventre. Entre lentement! pas trop vite, entre en voguant comme un rêve s’avance avec toutes les voiles pleines de vent, et lentement remplit le ventre de la réalité. Je ne peux pas ne pas te laisser m’emplir. Il ne s’agit entre nous que d’impossibles. (p.87)

Despite the obviously sexual nature of this physical coupling, the frequent slippages between the physical and the emotional in Cixous’s text preclude an indisputable literal (sexual) reading of this passage. The imagery used is as heterosexual as it is lesbian (or indeed male homosexual), and the interior of the body can be read as the interior (emotional and psychical) self. Emma Wilson persuasively argues for a reading of the relationship as an erotic lesbian one, in which Cixous’s poetical slippages between the literal and the figurative render lesbianism both in and out of the closet in order to resist the enclosure of both female-female sexuality and the text in ‘any minoritizing classification’ (p.139).
Whether or not the loving relationship between the women in *Le Livre de Promethea* is perceived as an erotic one, it is also described as cannibalistic (p.70), passionate (p.76), intense (p.153), painful (pp.112-16) and maternal: Promethea is (re)born (p.150), an innocent woman-child who needs reassurance (p.140) as much as her independence (p.170) from *je*. The intensity of their loving relations brings pain and suffering as well as happiness, but to *je*, 'le goût du feu' and the 'tempêtes' of passion are preferable to the 'agréable baie de la zone tempérée' where she was calm – but becalmed – before her relationship with Promethea (p.153). Their relationship is an 'état d’invasion mutuelle' (p.67), lived as a tension between total identification and the fear of losing the self in another, and thus, in this sense, mirroring the textual relations between them. The love between *je/H* and Promethea is both 'enfer' and 'paradis', a love which is lived to the limits: consuming, devouring but also giving.48

Having written her mythical, textual Promethea, *je* wants to return to reality 'puisqu’enfin nous sommes au vrai monde' (p.232). Their real, lived relationship is what counts. However, the textual and the real Promethea continue to interweave. Promethea may not think she is like the textual Promethea, but to *je*, who has only 'recopi[é] la vérité', she is (p.245). Promethea *is* the 'belle' Promethea that *je* has written. The textual and the real Promethea become one, and, in the last words of the text, Promethea, simply, *is* (p.248). Ultimately, the writing of 'le livre de Promethea' is ended and the text is passed 'du côté de la lecture' (p.68). It is now up to its readers to 'essayer le collier' of dreams that Promethea continues to thread, and to 'ajouter tout ce qu’on voudrait bien recevoir' (p.247). Cixous's (women) readers are free – and are encouraged – to continue to create their own mythical, textual Promethea – their own version(s) of a liberated, newly born woman.
In ‘La Venue à l’écriture’, as well as the place of writing in her life, Cixous describes what is, to her, the fundamental importance of reading: ‘Je lis pour vivre [...] je me nourrissais de texte’ (p.29). Reading is nourishment – reading is food for life. For Cixous’s readers, her mythical and mythological Promethea may provide similar nourishment. Promethea’s name evokes and feminises the multiple versions of the mythical Prometheus which exist in a variety of cultures and historical periods, and she thus resists enclosure in any one previous model. Rather, she offers an infinite variety of potentialities to the speculating reader engaged on the Dalyian ‘Otherworld Journey’ of reading, discovering and creating the possibilities of what women can become (Gyn/Ecology, p.1). In itself, this is admittedly a somewhat utopian vision. However, the constant slippage, interchange and exchange in Le Livre de Promethea between life and text, between reality and fiction, where each one overflows into the other, encourages a similarly mobile reading position. In his/her reading, Cixous’s reader slips from text to life and back again; the conceptual slides into the material, the imaginative into reality. The ever-present question of whether the elsewhere of the text can translate into an elsewhere in reality is only answerable through reading. More than the telling of a single relationship, Le Livre de Promethea offers its readers an exploration of a wealth of possible women-to-women relations: friends, lovers, sisters, mothers, daughters – in textual and in sexual terms, poetically and politically, in mythic imagination and in lived reality. If, as Cixous says, we do not consider writing ‘comme fin’, if we do not separate the text from life, perhaps the creativity that reading is can overflow productively and transformationally into the performances that ultimately make up the realities of our lives.
SUMMARY

The work of my three chosen authors offers an array of examples of textual women-to-women relations in post-1980 French fictional writing by women. Maternal relationships are a feature of all the texts discussed, but none of them can be said to idealise, or even to celebrate, motherhood per se. In all cases, the various functions which are generally accepted to be part of maternity do not necessarily coincide with biological motherhood. In Constant’s Le Grand Ghâpal, Emilie-Gabrielle is ‘mothered’ by three different women characters (as indeed were the demoiselles of the eighteenth century), the maternal functions of procreation, nurturing and education being split between them. In L’Hiver de beauté, Baroche’s practical and textual sisterhoods include maternal relationships between women, such as Luce Irigaray notes exist among women in modern women’s groups (Le Corps-à-corps, p.61) and, in Cixous’s Le Livre de Promethea, writing itself, as well as the loving relationship between the two women, is (self-)engendering. In all the examples, the acts that entail mothering are to some extent separated from the person of the mother.

Above all, all the texts attest to the importance, for girls’ and women’s identity, of relationships with women other than mothers. In Le Livre de Promethea, je/H and Promethea live (and write) a multiplicity of relationships with each other. In L’Hiver de beauté, both Queria and Isabelle find themselves as individuals with the support and recognition of their different sisterhoods. Initially, sibling rivalry for the affection and attention of their parents determines Isabelle’s relationship with her sister, Madeleine, succeeded by competition for the love of the same man (Armand-Marie), but, ultimately, when it really matters, (all) the women are there to support each other – to combat monotony and to deal with crises. In this respect, it is perhaps important to note that all
Constant’s little girl characters are without siblings. Neither Tiffany nor Chrétienne have to compete with anyone else for the meagre attention given to them by their parents, but neither do they have anyone to share that deprivation with. In *Le Grand Ghâpal*, Emilie-Gabrielle does not want for attention, since she has a variety of relationships which give it to her alone, but perhaps Julie eventually fulfils a sisterly role as together (and against each other) the two women revolt against men and society, and thus Emilie-Gabrielle is able to find her lost self and to assume her identity.50

Cixous’s *Le Livre de Promethea* consciously explores the tensions of intersubjective relations, the pleasures and pitfalls of loving an/other. The love between the women is so intense that it threatens to consume them both, and indeed at times it is as if they are lost in each other. However, the writing/loving subject *je* is also H, not only in order to get close to Promethea as another subject but also so as not to lose herself, and Promethea is inscribed in the text, both mythically and in reality, as the ultimate of free subjects. In *Le Grand Ghâpal*, Emilie-Gabrielle’s relationship with Sophie-Victoire reveals similar tensions. At times, Sophie-Victoire may forget her self in her devotion to Emilie-Gabrielle, although the narcissistic basis of her love for her niece would seem to save her from losing her own identity in the relationship. In turn, with the loss of Sophie-Victoire, Emilie-Gabrielle loses her sense of self, although, as it would seem to turn out, only temporarily. In *L’Hiver de beauté*, as much as love, the women give each other respect as individual subjects. In this novel, the evident intermittency of both Isabelle’s and Queria’s connections with a sisterhood reveals these relationships to be mutually intersubjective rather than relations of permanent dependence.

In *Le Grand Ghâpal*, only Sophie-Victoire has an identity as a woman as well as that of a mother-figure, since Emilie-Gabrielle’s mother and her nurse have no real
existence apart from that connected with their maternal functions. Sophie-Victoire is a woman with a professional identity and a powerful role, and, contrary to stereotypes of women in religious orders, she is also a woman with sexual desires. As a mother-figure devoting herself to Emilie-Gabrielle’s education, she prepares her niece for her future role by educating her and initiating her in – and against – the values and ways of society; at the end of the novel, Emilie-Gabrielle appears to reproduce the social status quo while actually subverting it. In *L’Hiver de beauté*, Hendrickje needs to mother anyone who needs mothering (Anneke, Isabelle, Madeleine...) but she is also a sexually desiring woman (p.84), and as far as the eighteenth-century social context allows, she has a life of her own. Indeed, many of the mothers and mother-figures in Baroche’s novels are also independent, active, sexual women; for characters such as Isabelle in *L’Hiver de beauté* and both Flore and Elodie in *Les Ports du silence*, their mothering roles are only a part of their lives – not their whole life.

Despite the maternal and sisterly nature of the relationships, in all three texts under discussion they also have erotic connotations: in *Le Grand Ghâpal*, Sophie-Victoire’s sensuous and passionate relations with Emilie-Gabrielle; in *L’Hiver de beauté*, the caresses Isabelle gives to and receives from other women as well as the ‘incestuous’ episode with her dying sister; and in *Le Livre de Promethea*, the sexual terms in which the relations between je/H and Promethea are inscribed. However, the overtly textual nature of the texts themselves destabilises a wholly erotic interpretation in each of these cases, but the ambiguity of meaning is enough to call attention to the way we (necessarily) eroticise intimate physical relations between individuals. Moreover, the overt textness foregrounds the reading of the text, and, in each case, the reader has to take responsibility for his/her own interpretation – and to decide whether or not to read the
episode as an erotic one. On the one hand, to eroticise these relationships is to deny
possibilities of non-erotic but loving intimate relations between women, of what Irigaray
perhaps means in Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère by ‘entre beaucoup de guillemets:
““homosexualité secondaire””: women’s love for ‘les autres femmes-soeurs’ which is
different from ‘l’amour archaïque pour la mère’ – same sex love which is not necessarily
of an erotic nature (p.31). On the other hand, to de-eroticise apparently sexual relations is
to risk denying lesbian sexuality, of rendering it invisible. The oscillation between the
two positions which may well occur in the reading of the texts can, however, be a
positive one. Emma Wilson’s suggestion that the lesbianism of Le Livre de Promethea
operates both in and out of the closet, to avoid enclosure in a marginal(ised) identity, is a
valid and useful way of reading this text. Nonetheless, I would also argue that the
uncertainty, the residue of doubt which remains even in a lesbian reading of this sort,
allows the text also to operate on a non-erotic level and to embrace a non-lesbian reading.
Rather than denying lesbian sexuality, I would suggest that such a reading allows the text
to function on multiple levels, and that it also has the advantage of stressing the loving
relationship between two subjects, irrespective of any specific sexuality.

To some extent, all three texts discussed inscribe women’s identity within a mythic
dimension. The least obvious in this connection is Baroche’s novel, but it must be
remembered (from Chapter 2) that both Queria and Isabelle take on the quasi-mythical
identity of la sirène borgne, an identity which at once subversively inserts them in, and
distances them from, a timeless (masculine) tradition of seductive but (apparently)
beautiful and dangerous women. In Cixous’s text, Promethea’s mythical status is
inscribed in her very name, and like the masculine versions before her, as a mythical
figure she can embrace and accommodate a vast range of qualities and identities. As a
feminised Prometheus, she is the inscription of a loved and loving other, a goddess and a liberated woman, a figure of the potentialities of women’s identity – and of the fantasies and desires of the reader. Constant’s *Le Grand Ghâpal* wickedly opposes the Christian veneration of the Virgin Mary with the inscription of a different, women-centred version of the virgin mother and of sainthood. The female aunt-niece dyad excludes the *need* for a heterossexual relationship to ensure descent, but it does not *require* the exclusion of sexual relationships with men for the individual women concerned. Moreover, this arrangement counters the glorification of the Christian mother-son relationship with a ‘mother-daughter’ configuration. Above all, the powerful influence of the cult of the Virgin Mary on the imaginary of girls’ and women’s identity is outrageously subverted by the uncertain nature of Emilie-Gabrielle’s eventual sainthood.

Myths – and the body of myth – are an influential and eternal part of the imaginary of a culture, and as such contribute to the beliefs of that culture and to explanations of human behaviour. For Irigaray, however, myth is more than explanation, it is also involved in shaping culture; myths are part of what Chodorow refers to as the ‘cultural stories’ which are internalised and become part of our identity – part of the way we perceive ourselves, the way others perceive us, and the way we live our lives. In these terms, therefore, the (re-)inscription of myths – differently, subversively – theoretically involves the re-(con)textualisation not only of myth but also of identities.

The textual examples under discussion in this chapter identify a diffusedness of mothering (functions or acts) between a number of mother figures and within different relational configurations. In the context of Irigaray’s insistence that women themselves must work against the symbolic (and imaginary) matricide that she identifies in Western
culture, that women themselves must work towards creating female genealogies and
towards re-formulating the mother-daughter relationship, the diffused nature of
mothering in these texts may appear to be a somewhat negative response. Certainly, no
single positive model emerges. This may simply imply that there is a certain amount of
confusion among contemporary women as to the (potential) nature of mother-daughter
relationships— or indeed of women-to-women relationships on a wider scale. On the
other hand, this variety of inscriptions of maternal relations can surely be read more
positively.

One of the major difficulties for women-as-mothers in modern Western societies is
that of guilt. If women wish to be mothers and to have careers (or any other sort of
independent mode of existence), as many do, they have to reconcile their desire for a
separate individual identity with socio-cultural and psychological pressures to conform to
ideal—or even just normal—perceptions of what mothers are (supposed to be and do).
However, if, as Irigaray, Benjamin, Chodorow, and Kristeva in different ways all seem to
suggest, the woman in the mother must exist—and live—then, for the sake of their
daughters as well as for themselves, the guilt of not being (able to be) an all-providing,
constantly-available mother must be alleviated. Moreover, although so much
responsibility (and blame) for a child’s (or, here, girl’s) development is commonly laid
upon the mother, as ‘a primary architect of the human psyche’, it is also accepted that
other women (and men) have important roles to play in the ongoing process that is the
acquisition (or construction—or creation) of identity, for example in education, affection,
identification, support, inspiration, intersubjective recognition. Consequently, the
proliferation of different maternal relations in the texts under discussion, can be seen in a
much more positive light. D.W. Winnicott suggests that it is the mothering technique
rather than the specific person of the mother that is important for the development of
the child. Winnicott generously interprets Klein's 'breast' by 'the whole technique of
mothering', which does not even necessarily include breast-feeding; moreover, his 'good
enough mother' is not necessarily the infant's own mother but a prime carer who adapts
to the infant's needs.\textsuperscript{56} Mothering relations are, therefore, important, but they do not have
to be (perceived to be) performed by one person, indeed perhaps they should not — and,
surely, in reality they cannot.\textsuperscript{57} The different configurations of maternity in the texts of
Constant, Baroche and Cixous confirm and inscribe this position. Rather than seeing this
variety as evidence of confusion, or as the inability to find a coherent model to embrace
or to reconcile mothering, perhaps it is more productive to see it as a recognition of a
\textit{necessary} diffusedness of mothering, a \textit{necessary} de-investment in the (single or whole)
person of the mother — necessary to alleviate maternal guilt, necessary to girls’
psychology, and necessary to positive and productive perceptions of women’s identity. If
the mother is not expected to provide all the mothering, if the daughter does not expect
the mother to provide all the mothering, then the processes of differentiation and
identification will surely be lived differently. If women who are mothers are also able to
be (perceived as) women in different ways, and if a variety of different relationships
between women are (re)valued, then, in Irigaray’s terms, perhaps we can psychologically
and culturally begin to counter the matricide of which we are all guilty.

If literary texts are loci of cultural inscription, not only as reflections — and
reinforcements — of existing cultural reality but also as agents of cultural transformation,
then these post-1980 textual configurations of women-to-women relations may be a
useful indicator of emerging discourses of motherhood and of the changing nature of
perceptions of maternity — textually and in reality, in the imaginary and in the symbolic.\textsuperscript{58}
In all the examples discussed, this is more than a matter of representation, more than a matter of the reader making positive reading identifications. The self-conscious textuality of the texts encourage the reader to reflect on his/her reading position. Moreover, poetical writing, humour, uncertainty, shocking and scandalous episodes all contribute to the reader's self-interrogation. In this chapter, maternity has been discussed on both literal and metaphorical levels. The two levels are not, however, mutually exclusive; there is an inherent exchange between them. The very use of maternity as a metaphor is often contentious but, as such, it productively calls into question what it is exactly that we mean by 'maternity', by 'mothering', and how far what we mean by 'mothering' is and should (continue to) be associated with the person of the mother.

The textness of the texts themselves suggests a reading which creates an exchange between the text and reality. In this respect, it is perhaps useful to remember that, in 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena', Winnicott cites literature (and other creative art) as transitional phenomena. Transitional objects and transitional phenomena are related to both external and internal objects and constitute an intermediate area of experience in the infant's development based on the illusion that what the child creates exists. Winnicott suggests that the intensity of this experience is present throughout life in relation to art, religion and other forms of creativity (p.242). In reading, therefore, perhaps we can begin to let go of old formulations which are becoming redundant for our development in order to hold on to transitional textual elsewheres as part of the process of finding – creating – new configurations and new realities. The texts of Constant, Baroche and Cixous inscribe a multiplicity of maternal relations, where mothering is shared by multiple mother-figures, and where a woman's identity is (re)created and assumed through and in her relations with a number of different women. For the reader,
the ‘reading encounter’ itself may constitute one such relationship. Reading women’s writing (for women) may be figured in terms of Baroche’s ‘une sororité efficace’, but perhaps its ‘efficacité’ is only evident if we (women) engage with the texts’ demands to create, if we (women) assume responsibility for our (creative) readings, and allow the overflowing and exchange between text and reality, between the metaphorical and the literal, between our imaginary and the symbolic, between identities and subjectivity, to enable us not only to imagine but also to perform a multiplicity of maternal relations – with our mothers, with our daughters, with other women.

Indeed it is the nature of this exchange between text and reality that is the very crux of the current study, for therein lies the full transformative potential of the interactions between text and identity that have so far been identified. The next and final chapter engages precisely with this problematic by means of a discussion of ‘difference’.

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1 See also Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l’autre femme* which charts the repression of the mother-as-origin in the history of Western culture.
5 See, for example, Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: The Women’s Press, 1979) for motherhood as oppression; Annie Leclerc, *Parole de femme*, for a celebration of motherhood. In *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (London: Virago, 1990), Jessica Benjamin classifies contemporary celebrations of motherhood such as this as examples of ‘reenchantment’ or ‘the attempt to replace a lost relationship with an ideal’ (p.206). ‘Reenchantment’ in this scenario is a response to a prior disenchantment.
6 See, for example, Irigaray’s discussion of a ‘placental economy’ of mutual respect in *Je, tu, nous*; Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) for ‘maternal thinking’ and ‘maternal pacifism’. See also Elisabeth Badinter, *L’Amour en plus: Histoire de l’amour maternel (XVIIe-XXe siècle)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), in which Badinter argues the case for maternal love against maternal instinct. Also, but arguably less successfully, Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, who, despite the negativity of her treatment of motherhood, maintains that it is women’s socio-economic situation that determines the way motherhood is lived psychologically.
brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from
psychoanalysis and other works, ed. David R. Crownfield [albany: state university of New York Press, 1992],
3 julia kristeva, 'Un nouveau type d'intellectuel: Le dissident', Tel Quel, 74 (Winter 1977), pp.3-8 (p.6).
5 This despite the fact that the 'personal' maternal narrative of this essay relates to a mother-son
relationship. For Freud's position, see sigmund freud, 'femininity', in new introductory lectures on
psycho-analysis and other works, standard edition, 22 (London: hogarth Press, 1964): 'A mother is only
brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from
ambivalence of all human relationships' (p.133), because, Freud goes on to say, through a son, a mother
can realise ambitions that she cannot fulfil herself as a woman (in society).
6 Following Benjamin's practice in this study, I shall generally continue to refer only to the mother as the
(still usual) prime carer, though much of what follows, as in Benjamin's text, relates to the importance of
intersubjective relations between the child and any/all prime carer(s).
7 More generally, see also Sheila Rowbotham, 'To Be or Not To Be: The Dilemmas of Mothering',
feminist review, 31 (Spring 1989), pp.82-93, for a review of the contradictions of motherhood for
feminism; naomi segal's entry on 'motherhood', in feminism and psychoanalysis: A critical dictionary,
ed. Elizabeth Wright, pp.266-70, for a review of feminist work on the subject.
8 Julia kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', in histoires d'amour (Paris: Denoël, 1983), pp.295-327; this essay was
first published as 'Hérenchique de l'amour', Tel Quel, 74 (Winter 1977), pp.30-49.
Interestingly, luce irigaray presents a positive feminist reading of the Annunciation in J'ai
ta: cela signifie ne pas toucher à son corps sans lui demander si elle le souhaitait ou le désirait' (p.191). irigaray
argues for a (feminist) interpretation that posits the Annunciation as respect for Mary rather than the usual
one of imposition/submission.
11 The left-hand, personal, maternal narrative, which interrupts, disrupts and erupts into the main narrative
of this essay, is often attributed to kristeva autobiographically. However, as Marilyn edelstein suggests, it
may also be either the discourse of a fictionalised version of kristeva-as-mother or of 'a poeticized
mother's voice' (Marilyn edelstein, 'Meta-Narrative, and Mater-Narrative in kristeva's “Stabat Mater”', in
pp.27-52 (p.38).
12 julia kristeva, 'Un Nouveau Type d'intellectuel: Le dissident', Tel Quel, 74 (Winter 1977), pp.3-8 (p.6).
14 This despite the fact that the 'personal' maternal narrative of this essay relates to a mother-son
relationship. For Freud's position, see sigmund freud, 'femininity', in New Introductory Lectures on
brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from
ambivalence of all human relationships' (p.133), because, Freud goes on to say, through a son, a mother
can realise ambitions that she cannot fulfil herself as a woman (in society).
15 See also Julia kristeva, 'Une(s) Femme(s)', Les Cahiers du GRIF, 7 (1975), pp.22-27, where she argues
for the creativity of a woman's love-hate relationship with her mother (p.26).
16 Following Benjamin's practice in this study, I shall generally continue to refer only to the mother as the
(still usual) prime carer, although much of what follows, as in Benjamin's text, relates to the importance of
intersubjective relations between the child and any/all prime carer(s).
17 See also Julia kristeva, Àu commencement était l'amour: Psychanalyse et foi (Paris: Hachette, 1985),
from which the same implication can be deduced.
18 In this connection, see also luce irigaray, Je, tu, nous, and Le Temps de la différence: Pour une
21 Choderlos de laclos, 'Des Femmes et de leur Éducation', In Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1979),
p.387-443.
22 Paule constant, 'L'Exil des éducatrices', Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature, 21.41
24 Constant's sources for Un Monde à l'usage des demoiselles include female educators such as Mme. de
Genlis and Mme. d'Epinay as well as references to educational ideas by men, including Rousseau.
According to elisabeth badinter in Emilie, Emilie: L'ambition féminine au XVIIIe siècle (Paris:
Flammarion, 1983), Mme. d'Epinay's Conversations d'Emilie sets out a programme for the education of girls
which borrows from, but which is also in opposition to, Rousseau's Emilie, that 'véritable pédagogie
de la soumission féminine' (Emilie, Emilie, p.388). Unlike Rousseau's Sophie in Emilie, Mme. d'Epinay's
Emilie 'n'est pas fâchée pour plaire à un Emilie, mais pour vivre heureuse et épanouie, peut-être en dépit
d'Emile...' (Emilie, Emilie, p.382). Mme. d'Epinay is concerned with girls' intellectual development,
with educating them to live in the world as it is, and with giving them a sense of an independent self. In this
respect, constant's novel, Le Grand Odépel, can be read as an ironic intertextual dialogue with Rousseau,
both for its interpretation of the implications of a model of education suggested by Mme. d'Epinay and for
the names of the main characters, Emilie-Gabrielle and Sophie-Victoire (my stress).
Movements in the 1970s created and reflected a sense of belonging and unity, that has shattered somewhat. Revolution, which gave the term Brèves, Franck.

...on the suffering of another and that such suffering can entail a rapturous religious experience, but this does not seem to me to be a totally convincing interpretation of this episode.

Similarly in a number of Baroche’s short stories: for example, in ‘Si j’étais l’homme que tu dis...’, in Trialet 3 (Paris: Nouvelles Nouvelles, 1989), pp.53-73, Florette cares for her niece, Sylvie; in ‘Le Lézard d’or’, Benoît becomes attached as much to Dimitri’s child as she does to him; and in ‘La Scie’, in... ‘Perdre le Souffle’ (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), pp.149-209, Nathalie becomes a substitute mother to her lover’s son, Franch.

...For the term ‘compagnonnage’, see Christiane Baroche, ‘Conversation avec Christiane Rolland Hasler’, Brèves, 39 (1992), pp.3-21. In this interview, Baroche also values ‘l’amour-amitié’ over ‘l’amour-passion’ (p.8).

The term soroité does not exist in French, although it is commonly used by Quebec feminists. There is no feminine version of (the universal) fraterntité. Baroche’s use of soroité is, therefore, both provocative and political, particularly given the historical setting of the novel against the backdrop of the French Revolution, which gave the term fraterntité such a symbolic (and sexually indifferent) place in French culture and language. The anglophone feminist use of ‘sisterhood’ in the context of Women’s Liberation Movements in the 1970s created and reflected a sense of belonging and unity, that has shattered somewhat since the 1980s amid the difficulties of accommodating diversities within feminism.

...for this latter point (pp.93-94).

See Helen Haste, The Sexual Metaphor (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), in which Haste shows how in Western thought, binary oppositions, like activity and passivity, are mapped on to gender polarities and thus reinforce and reproduce the loop of stereotyping. In Baroche’s Les Ports du silence, Louise Fournier and her husband are a couple where the active/passive man/woman equivalence is reversed. In L’Hiver de beauté, the disruption of the binary equivalence is arguably more complex. Women and men are both active and passive, and Barney is ‘un peu féminin’ whereas Queria and Isabelle are ‘un peu virile[s]’ (p.283) — a slightly feminine man and slightly virile women.

...It may be difficult to understand the regenerative properties of the latter two liquids. However, in L’Hiver de beauté, Hector’s rape of Isabelle leaves her triumphant (p.46), and Queria suggests that Isabelle’s sexual activity (as Mme. de Merteuil) was a learning process (p.47). Moreover, I use the term ‘regenerative’ here as an interpretation of ‘délivrent, baptisent’, which include the sense of liberation and initiation.

...For example, see Michel Foucault, Histoire de la sexualité, I: La volonté de savoir (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) for the historical context of the category and identity of homosexuality (p.59).

...For a detailed reading of this episode, see chapter 5, pp.245-51.

...See Michael Worton, ‘Le Chant de la sirène’, for the connection between Baroche’s women and Kristeva’s sujet en proces (p.83). More generally, I am indebted to his thinking on L’Hiver de beauté which has had a formative influence on my own approach to the text.

...See Morag Shiach, Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing for this latter point (pp.93-94).

...See my chapter 1 for an exposition of Cixous’s use of rhythm in relation to ‘voice’, to pre-Oedipal relations with the mother, and to the rhythms and words of the German language of her own mother.

...See chapter 5 for a discussion of Cixous’s portrayal of this male figure.

...The statements do, however, make reference to biological fact. In normal circumstances, girls are born with all the potential eggs of their womanhood already within their body. Up to 700,000 immature egg cells are present at birth as primary ovarian follicles. Most degenerate before puberty, but in the childbearing years, one follicle per monthly cycle develops to maturity (Encyclopaedia Britannica).


...See Sarah Cornell, ‘Hélène Cixous’ Le Livre de Promethea: Paradise Refound’, in Writing Differences, which stresses the ‘oscillation between provenance and belonging’ which is present in the French de
In Cixous's text, 'le livre de Promethea' is also 'la livre de Promethea' (p.78), thus carrying connotations of weight (the person) as well as the possibility of a feminine book. 'Livre' also has associations of delivery and revelation ('livrer') and liberation ('délivrer'). It would seem appropriate to read this 'approach' also in terms of Clarice Lispector's textual 'approach' (see my Chapter 2).

See Hélène Cixous, 'Tancrède continue', in Entre l'écriture, pp.139-68, where Cixous stresses not only the necessity but also the dangers of saying 'je suis une femme' (p.164).

In this connection, see Claudine Guégan Fisher, La Cosmogonie d'Hélène Cixous (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), pp.346-54, for a useful discussion of Le Livre de Promethea, and for her connection of one of the text's central motifs, the cave paintings at Lascaux, with Promethea's animalism.


I enclose 'real' in inverted commas here as Promethea is both 'real' and 'textual' within the text itself.


Hélène Cixous, 'Poésie, e(s)ti politique?', Des femmes en mouvements hebdo, 4 (30.11.79), pp.29-33, (p.32).

This point surely highlights another aspect of this novel's subversive intertextual dialogue with Rousseau. The friendship between Constant's Julie and Emilie-Gabrielle is thus somewhat different from the female friendship between Rousseau's Julie and her friend Claire in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse (Paris: Garnier, 1960).


In this respect, I would cite also Délude, Beethoven à jamais ou l'existence de Dieu and Manne aux Mandelaums aux Mandelas as other of Cixous's texts which focus on the relationship of love rather than on the (in these three texts, heterosexual) configurations of sexuality which are inscribed.


See, for example, Lyn Mikel Brown & Carol Gilligan, Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development for their 'resonant relationships between girls and women' (p.7); Jessica Benjamin, The Bonds of Love for the 'holding environment' a teacher might provide to enable self-exploration, recognition and self-recognition (pp.120-21); and Elizabeth Fallaize, 'Filling in the Blank Canvas: Memory, Inheritance and Identity in Marie Redonnet's Rose Mélie Rose', Forum for Modern Language Studies, 28.4 (1992), pp.320-34, which shows how female identity is constructed in Redonnet's text through a matrilineal genealogy, a succession of initiatory experiences and a series of female role models.


See Elizabeth Fallaize, 'Filling in the Blank Canvas', who states that, in the positive matrilineal-based construction of identity in Redonnet's text, 'the maternal is of infinite significance but is not determining' (p.333); other relationships play an important part.

It is important to state that I am not equating either the imaginary with the textual or the symbolic with reality here. My contention is, however, that textual inscriptions and representations in literature are part of what becomes a cultural (and personal) imaginary. As set out in chapter 1, Irigaray's work suggests that the flow is two-way. I would argue that this flow and exchange can occur in reading, and in the effects of reading.
5. **SEXUAL/TEXTUAL DIFFERENCE: EXPLORING SEXUAL AND TEXTUAL RELATIONS**

The term ‘difference’ has a rather problematic place in modern feminist thinking since it has a variety of meanings and is applied in a variety of ways. Fundamental to discourse about identity, it is, nevertheless, subject to misunderstanding. For this reason, this chapter is devoted explicitly to ‘difference’. Beginning with an exposition and a discussion of the most common applications of this term within a broadly feminist framework, it goes on to explore, by means of fiction-based examples, some interventions that reading can make in the context of that discussion.

In feminisms which are concerned with ‘sexual difference’, ‘difference’ usually relates to the difference, or rather, differences, between women and men. ‘Difference’ in this sense is frequently placed in opposition to ‘equality’, since, historically, radical feminism (also known as ‘difference feminism’) and materialist feminism (which is primarily concerned with socio-economic equality) have been defined in an oppositional relation to one another. Furthermore, in another oppositional coupling, ‘difference feminism’ has been largely associated with French psychoanalytically-based feminisms, whereas Anglo-American feminisms are more uniformly concerned with the socio-politico-economic equality of women and men. The poles of these binary couples, difference/radical/French feminism and equality/materialist/Anglo-American feminism, are often equated but they are not, in fact, necessarily coinciding categorical groupings. Christine Delphy, for example, has publicly taken issue with what is understood by the Anglo-American-coined term ‘French feminism’, from which she, as a materialist French feminist, distances herself.¹
'Difference', in its application to 'sexual difference', is at the heart of the feminist debate on essentialism, which hinges on whether sexual difference is conceived as biology- or essence-based, or as a cultural construction. Feminist misgivings about essentialism reveal, for the most part, resistance to and fear of the dangers of the reductionism of biological determinism, that is to say, of reducing women to their biology, identifying women with some sort of fixed nature, theorising women's subordinate position in society as biologically-determined and, therefore, as unchangeable. On the other hand, an essentialist position, such as is often attributed to sexual difference theorist, Luce Irigaray, is acceptable to other feminists as a process, as part of becoming, rather than an end in itself, and as a creative, transforming, questioning production of knowledge. Rosi Braidotti considers such 'essentialism' somewhat differently. She interprets French radical feminism's attention to sexual difference as the theorisation of positive difference as 'a category of thought' and a 'strategy of action' and Irigaray's conception of women's subjectivity as 'the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experience, defined by the overlapping variables of sex, race, and class' -- in other words as a strategic epistemological, philosophical and political theorisation of the subject as plural, mobile and complex rather than unitary and fixed.

Reviewing the feminist debate on essentialism, Tina Chanter, in Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers, finds that the 'essentialist dismissal of Irigaray rests upon an essentialist definition of feminism, namely, the idea that feminism can only consist in playing down sexual difference'. In these terms, the justification for this dismissal would also seem to rest on the sex/gender opposition, which, although useful, has become, in Chanter's view, 'oversimplified and
overworked' (p.42). The sex/gender distinction is all too readily and simply explained as being equivalent to the nature/culture binary division: sex is biological (commonly defined by chromosomes, or associated with reproductive organs) and is, therefore, linked with nature; gender is psychological and/or social (made up of qualities acquired or attributed) and is, therefore, associated with culture. As Chanter points out, such categorisations suggest a more clear-cut distinction than the actual complex relationship between the terms sex and gender (and indeed even between nature and culture), and she counsels against transforming the divide into 'a reified dogma' (p.23). Chanter, an *afficionado* of Judith Butler’s constructionist conception of both the body and gender, defends and values Irigaray for contesting the simplicity of the sex/gender categorisation, seeing her ‘interrogation of sexual difference’ as ‘at the same time a concern with the possibilities of social change’ (p.2).

Feminist invocations of ‘difference’ are problematic not only for their relationship with the ambivalences of essentialism, but also for a concomitant universalising factor. Contemporary feminist theory has had to take on board the task of accommodating the diversity between women as well as attempting to understand the intersections of women’s social, political, psychological and biological differences from men. For example, in *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly calls for women to join in sisterhood and friendship on a ‘Voyage’ to becoming, but her assumptions of a common bond between women is alienating to black feminists like Audre Lorde particularly because of the Eurocentric bias of her analysis. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes the important point that not all ‘the world’s women’ relate to women and femininity in literature in the same way. On the other hand, Adrienne Rich’s essay, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, itself attacking
heterosexuality as a universalising and normative matrix, in turn fed debates about whether one must therefore be a lesbian in order to be a feminist. Negotiations between individual and collective positions are notoriously difficult but in *Nomadic Subjects*, Rosi Braidotti defends feminism’s political subject “we women” for its empowerment of the ‘subjective becoming of each one of us “I, woman”’ (p.200). The ‘community’ is thus a ‘nurturing space’ (*Patterns of Dissonance*, p.261). A collective political position can enable each individual woman to find different ways of being and living.

In another sense, ‘difference’ is so important for feminism because of the part it plays, in the form of differentiation, in constructions of the self and in both individual and collective identities. In her essay, ‘Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective’, Nancy Chodorow formulates a relational and situated concept of difference where differentiation (from the m/other) involves not only a perception of the self-other distinction (difference), but a perception of ‘two selves, two presences, two subjects’ which interact. Moreover, the differentiating process of infantile development has implications for self-other relations throughout life. In this connection, Chodorow points out that ‘the other side [...] of recognizing the other’s subjectivity, is the ability to recognize differences with a small “d”, differences that are produced and situated historically’ (p8). This relational concept of difference and of the process of differentiation enables not only the development of a strong sense of self but also an acceptance and respect for the diversity of others. For Chodorow, this is especially pertinent to feminism in respect of individual mother-daughter relations and in respect of the differences (for example, of class, race, sexuality) between individual women and between groups of women. Most
importantly, she argues that "differentiation is not distinctness and separateness, but a particular way of being connected to others" (p.11). In this formulation, individual autonomy is developed through relation rather than negation and results in a strong sense of selfhood. In the same essay, Chodorow suggests that 'an assertion of hyperseparateness' (difference) is linked to feelings of insecurity and to a lack of sense of self (p.8). It may be that feminist affirmations of women’s ‘difference’ can be profitably understood in this light. The collective strength of the identity ‘women’ and ‘feminism’ provides possibilities that are both distancing and differentiating and creative: it includes both an assertion of women’s difference from the sexually indifferent (but effectively male) universal to which women have historically been subsumed, and the creation of a space and/or a place in which to explore and inscribe the potentialities of that differentiation on the way to constructing a stronger sense of self. For women writers (artists), this hyperdifferentiation may be identified in a double search for originality: the Bloomian ‘anxiety of influence’ shared by all artistic creators in relation to their precursors and also, specifically as women, in relation to a male-dominated canon – to male precursors. Chodorow’s relational differentiation is also relevant, since artistic creation entails situating oneself in relation to (within, against, as marginal to, associated with) a diachronic and/or synchronal tradition. Indeed, contemporary women writers’ agonistic relations with other women writers are likely to be predominantly of a synchronal rather than a diachronic nature, since a tradition of women writers of the past has been revealed only comparatively recently through the feminist archaeological work of recovery, and still exists only in a marginal or subordinate position to the (male-dominated) literary canon.
Marginality as a social or psychological position may be the result of exclusion or of suppression of difference, but, in some instances, it can also be a position of strength. In *Representations of the Intellectual*, Edward Said highlights the positive aspects of marginality for the intellectual: a de-centred position enables one to see things differently, to respond to innovation, to take risks. By definition, this marginal position must always be a mobile one, for as social changes come about, the margins must be constantly re-located. In *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, Susan Rubin Suleiman differentiates between women artists (and writers) and the avant-garde: although both are positioned on the margins of mainstream culture, the avant-garde choose the margins as a place of subversive activity, but women are relegated to the margins and, to a large degree, excluded from the canon. Moreover, women are in a position of double marginality – both to mainstream culture and to the ‘mainstream’ (male-dominated) avant-garde tradition. Suleiman suggests that in the context of 1970s feminism, this double marginality may have been empowering, since, at that time, women’s writing (or rather, what she terms a ‘feminine text’) could be conceived as ‘subversive in itself’ (p. 17).

Suleiman, along with Kristeva (in the interview, ‘L’Avant-garde aujourd’hui’, p. 166) is of the opinion that, in the 1990s, this is no longer true and that individual efforts rather than militant collective activity are the way to make a difference (p. 18).

This leads to yet another understanding of difference – as change – by raising the crucial question of whether literature can actually make a difference as Kristeva, Cixous, and indeed all avant-garde writers and many critics maintain. Fetterley’s claim that literature can have a political effect is perhaps not in dispute here, and indeed the philosophy of the avant-garde is founded on such a perspective (*The Resisting...*)
Reader, p.xi). In Subversive Intent, Suleiman usefully defines the character of the French avant-garde movements as: ‘a collective project [...] that linked artistic practices with an ideological critique of bourgeois thought and a desire for social change, so that the activity of writing could also be seen as a genuine intervention in the social, cultural and political arena’ (p.12). Here, the form, materiality and act of writing are as important as the content and this could be said to be true of surrealism’s, Tel Quel’s and Cixous’s activities, where writing in a different way from traditional or mainstream literature is a fundamental aspect of the project.

Critics, such as John Lechte, interpret the revolutionary effect of poetic language that Kristeva theorises in La Révolution du langage poétique as a transgression of ‘the symbolic law of the Father’ (‘Art, Love, and Melancholy’, p.29). By disrupting the grammatical and syntactical rules of the symbolic order, its political effect is to challenge that order and thus the institutions which it upholds.

In Kristeva’s most recent work, art (including literature) is diagnosed as necessary to the well-being of the individual psyche, and thus writing may be seen to have both political and psychical effects. Indeed, in Patterns of Dissonance, Braidotti argues that Kristeva’s central concern is ‘the intersection of the psychosexual with the social’ in relation to the way the socio-political field is structured by the unconscious (p.231). As a psychoanalyst, Kristeva is specifically concerned with the psyche of the individual in society. In Sens et non-sens de la révolte, she considers that both psychoanalysis and literature can contribute to the ‘culture-révolte’ which she considers absolutely necessary to counter the stagnation both of culture and of the psyche that she identifies in the contemporary world of consumerism and mass-media (p.21). Literature can make a difference politically, by asking questions, by
challenging norms, by calling into question ossified structures and institutions, 
but, according to Kristeva, literature can also make a real difference to the individual, 
since its interpretation (reading) takes the form of a ‘révolte’ in the sense of return, 
displacement, and renewal, and leads to a psychical modification of the reading 
subject (p.114).19

In ‘L’Expérience littéraire’, she troubles the separation between text and life by 
positing reading as a real life experience. Indeed, she goes further and, associating it 
with religious ritual, she suggests that reading is a spiritual experience of 
transubstantiation: a fusion of flesh and ideas, body and mind.20 The text is ‘un espace 
ou [...] se tisse la chair continue du monde dont Je fais partie: Je, écrivain; je, lecteur;
je, vivant, aimant, mourant’.21 Text and reality are not separate; they interweave. In 
Kristeva’s formulation in Sens et non-sens de la révolte, literature can really make a 
difference to, and, importantly, in, the individual psyche – a difference to, and in, the 
reader. She makes it clear, however, that reading is not simply about making 
identifications; it is an experience in which the reader has to interrogate and risk 
his/her own sense of identity:

Ecrire et/ou penser peut devenir, dans cette perspective, une mise en cause permanente du psychisme comme du monde. 
Il ne s’agit plus de se conformer à l’“universel” (tous aspirant aux mêmes valeurs, dans le meilleur des cas; aux droits de l’homme, par exemple), ni d’affirmer sa “différence” (ethnique, religieuse, sexuelle) intouchable et sacrée; encore moins de combattre une de ces tendances avec l’autre, ou simplement et savamment de les combiner. Il s’agit de pousser à bout l’exigence d’universel et l’exigence de singularité dans chaque individu, en faisant de ce mouvement simultané le ressort de la pensée en même temps que du langage. (pp.44-45)

Kristeva’s context is broad, and she does not specifically relate her theories to 
feminism or women; indeed she rejects the limitations of such concerns.
Nevertheless, since she speaks from within a psychoanalytical framework, she is concerned with the self and thus with (psycho-)sexual identity. Crucially, Kristeva brings together discussion about identity and discussion about language, meaning and ways of thinking. If the way we think about identity, about our selves, about others, is to change, we need to find ways of thinking (and speaking) differently. We need to be able to think (and say) the impossible.

In this connection, in *Sens et non-sens de la révolte*, Kristeva suggests that literature, when it confronts the reader with his/her own condition of being, is a ‘pensée de l'impossible’, literature is ‘l’*a*-pensée’ (pp.236-37). This ‘*a*-thought’ is not reducible to knowledge, but is connected to what Kristeva refers to as ‘*l’expérience littéraire*’, a dimension of experience achieved in reading by means of the language of literature (metaphor, sounds, sensation), which both reveals and veils meaning, engendering and engaging the desire and the imagination of the reader (p.254).

Reading and interpretation are thus not so much the containing, enclosing activities of making sense, but the freeing, speculative work of giving sense to the 'non-sens' of the text (p.445).

Kristeva’s recent work on literature is radically important for its concern with the effects on the reader. While it does not equate reading with the psychoanalytic cure, it is grounded in psychoanalytical theory and it associates reading with psychoanalysis for the modifying effect it may have on the individual psyche. Reading literature is thus more than an enriching, exhilarating, or even political, experience; reading may have a permanent effect on the individual. The reader can really be changed by his/her reading. According to Kristeva, however, this is certainly not the case in respect of all fiction. In her view, Proust is an exemplary example, and
she values the writing of Aragon, Sartre and Barthes for their revolt against the
idea of a single, unitary identity; on the other hand, for Kristeva, popular culture, and
even, it would seem, the majority of contemporary novels, offer the reader nothing of
the quasi-mystical 'expérience littéraire' of her favoured writers. Indeed, her
argument rests on the premise that the normalising nature of mass culture is actually
detrimental to our psychic well-being (p.19).

Kristeva's thinking on the 'culture-révolution' leads back to the term 'difference'.
Literature can make a difference. Literature can play a part in the process of thinking
difference, and of thinking differently. Feminism has a vested interest in exploring
ways of thinking which can free us (men and women) from the limitations of rational
thought, that 'scheme' of interpretation, which, according to Nietzsche, 'we cannot
throw off', but which is, for Braidotti, 'the mode of thinking of an idealized form of
masculinity' (Patterns of Dissonance, p.212). Braidotti, as well as Whitford and
Chanter, have lauded Irigaray as the most challenging of feminist philosophers,
engaged on the 'quite literally unthinkable' project of thinking radical otherness, of
bringing into existence what has not yet been thought, indeed perhaps what cannot
(yet) be thought within a Western system of logic (Ethics of Eros, p.174). Irigaray's
concerns are wide-ranging, but entail a radical re-thinking of feminine subjectivity
and a transformation in relationships both between women, and between women and
men.

Feminist theory is not alone in making connections between 'the feminine' and
'radical difference'. In Patterns of Dissonance, Braidotti discusses Deleuze and
Derrida in this connection, but, in contrast to feminism's specific concerns with
women, she finds that male philosophers' appropriations of 'woman' are
metaphorical (Derrida) and bodiless (Deleuze), and relate to a conceptual non-gendered difference rather than to women as subjects (pp.98-146). Women, as individuals, are once again excluded. Alice Jardine, creating the term ‘gynesis’ for the gendering of radical otherness as feminine, warns of its tendency to reinforce traditional (masculine) suppression of the feminine, although she values its creative potential for feminist thinking in developing new directions and ‘new fields of conceptuality’.  

Much is made of the ‘unthinkable’ concept of thinking differently, but few ‘different’ models of thinking have been developed by feminist theorists, although it is clear that alternative systems of logic do exist: in ‘La “Mécanique” des fluides’, Irigaray’s fluids are reminiscent of the fluidity of Heraclitus’s pre-Socratic thinking as flux and flow as well as of specifically feminine bodily fluids (Ce Sexe, pp.103-16); Kristeva, as Lechte points out, invokes other existing theories of logic, such as quantum mechanics and Indian thought in her discussion of poetic logic in ‘Poésie et négativité’ (Julia Kristeva, p.109); on the other hand, in Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing, for example, Cixous turns to dreams and to the unconscious for her ‘feminine’ fictions. It is interesting to note the foregrounding of the role of literature in these explorations of thinking differently – both in Kristeva’s preoccupations with poetic language, metaphor and the transubstantiation of the literary experience, and also in Cixous’s valorisation of fiction as an ‘ailleurs’ which does not have to conform to phallogocentric models (‘Sorties’, p.132). It may be virtually impossible to devise whole new systems of thought in the way philosophers of difference, such as Deleuze and Guattari, have attempted, but many feminist critics value the creative, inventive strategies of literature as triggers for thinking difference
differently: stories for their ‘proliferative and imaginative powers’ to transform,27 metaphors for their ‘capacity to offer us ordinary access to extraordinary thinking we may not yet have tried’,28 utopias which ‘enable us to imagine possibilities of difference for the brute, contingent world’ (*Feminism and Poetry*, p.179), writing for ‘la possibilité même du changement, l’espace d’où peut s’élancer une pensée subversive, le mouvement avant-coureur d’une transformation des structures sociales et culturelles’ (*Le Rire de la Méduse*, p.42), and alternative figurations as a potential ‘empowering force’ and ‘way out of the old schemes of thought’ (*Nomadic Subjects*, p.3). In *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti, valuing the nomadic for its transience, mobility and interconnectedness, proposes her own alternative figuration of subjectivity (nomadic subjects), and argues that ‘political fictions may be more effective, here and now, than theoretical systems’ (p.4).

In *Honey-Mad Women*, Patricia Yaeger identifies strategies such as dialogue, laughter, bilingualism, utopias, as ‘emancipatory discourses’ in women’s writing (p.252). She argues that the different realities communicated by such strategies in women’s writing form ‘the cognitive and emotional foundations for constructing a community of speaking women guaranteed by the presence of “others” who speak’ (p.277). In this way, she links the work of individual women writers to a collective, communal, feminist project of liberation. Her point is that these discourses can be recognised by the way they impel alternative readings, and I would suggest that some of the effects of reading the fiction of writers such as Baroche, Constant and Cixous which I have discussed during the course of this study could be considered in these terms. Constant’s narrative techniques, for example, tend to elicit from her readers a self-conscious and, therefore, interrogative, reading position. In Baroche’s novels, the
participation of the reader is engaged by the prevalence of the chatty, oral register of dialogue and narration, by textual and intertextual jokes, by unusual or shocking episodes, by the diverse and sometimes contradictory points of view which render a sense of uncertainty and invite the reader to contribute to the meaning of the text. Cixous's writing allows plenty of space for reader speculation, and indeed, demands it. Her utopian and imaginative figurings of women's subjectivity are open-ended and can be seen as strategies to encourage readers to continue their speculative thinking beyond the reading of the text. Her interrogation of, and play with, language in the form of puns, neologisms, metaphors, oxymorons, draw the reader in to meditate on how we are positioned and confined by language and, at the same time, to recognise how language is also a liberating device.

The forthcoming examples in this chapter are not concerned with exploring such liberatory strategies further but instead engage with ways in which reading makes an intervention into discussions of some of the aspects of difference already outlined. As we have seen, 'difference' is implicated both in an individual's sense of self and in the way s/he relates to others. In psychological and psychoanalytical terms, these processes are bound up together: the way the self is constituted in infancy bears on the way relationships are lived throughout life; moreover, there is an interdependence between one's continued sense of self and the way one relates to others. Importantly, relations with others are part of the real, material, socio-political world.

On a theoretical level, Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva are all concerned with relations with others. In J'aime à toi, Irigaray asks 'Comment dire autrement: “Je t’aime”? (p.201): how can we say 'I love you' without an appropriation of the other.
Her ‘j’aime à toi’ aims to account for mutual relations based on recognition of,
and, importantly for Irigaray, on listening in silence to, the other’s difference. Silence
is ‘un espace-temps encore vierge pour ton apparaître et ses expressions’ (p. 184), a
necessary gift to the other for the expression of his/her singularity. Relations with the
other are also a consistent theme in Cixous’s writing. Her early formulation of
bisexuality is a relational concept, since it entails being open to the other’s
differences, and the potential feminine economy that she asks her readers to imagine
in ‘Sorties’ is a non-appropriative, alternative economy of relations. In the late 1970s
and 1980s, Cixous’s work was influenced and dominated by Clarice Lispector’s
approach to the other, and latterly, her fictions explore and analyse the pains and
pleasures of loving relations with an/other. Kristeva, as a psychoanalyst, consistently
works on individual relationships, but is also concerned, specifically in Etrangers à
nous-mêmes, with relations on a broader, global scale – between groups, between
races. 29

All the fictional examples chosen for this chapter centre on self-other relations,
from the different perspectives of the textual, the political and the personal. The first
example explores the reader’s position in respect of textual relations with (different)
others, with particular reference to Constant’s ‘Africa’ novels; the second example is
a close reading of an episode in Baroche’s L’Hiver de beauté, and considers the place
of the individual (reader) in the process of changing social relations; and the final
example is concerned with different ways of thinking loving relations with the other
and is based on a reading of Cixous’s Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu.
EXAMPLE 1:

Paule Constant’s ‘Africa’ novels (*Ouregano, Balta and White Spirit*) merit consideration in specific relation to reading ‘difference’. In interviews, Constant is at pains to deny any political engagement or project in her writing about Africa. Explicitly declaring her own point of view, which is singularly subjective rather than more generally European or post-colonial, she maintains that she fictionalises her own personal Africa as she remembers it from her experiences of living in a variety of African countries – as a child, as an adolescent, and as a young woman. Constant’s relation to Africa is both nostalgic and troubled, both romantic and frank, but she emphasises that writing about Africa is writing (about) herself, since Africa is a part of her life and part of her own identity. Although she is French and teaches French literature in both French and U.S. universities, Constant’s experiences of living in many different parts of the world (Asia, South America as well as Africa) position her in a de-centred way to French culture and France. Nevertheless, different readers will necessarily respond in different ways to her textual portrayals of Africa and of Africans, and it is thus with the intervention that reading makes in the discussion that this example is concerned.

There is no single position or set of relationships between black and white societies and individuals in Constant’s ‘Africa’ novels. A myriad of different relations is portrayed. In French colonial *Ouregano*, the emphasis is on the divide between the black population and white colonial society. Without endorsing it, the narrative follows the perspective of the white colonialists, and the black population is largely invisible except for a few meeting points and intersections linked to the needs and duties of the whites: black Africans are present as patients at the hospital, as pupils at
the school, and as boys in the house. Lepers become visible as an intrusion – as beggars in the street and as a mob demanding better food. Only a few individuals become visible in a more sustained way:

Marie-Rosalie, the fourteen-year old métisse who works in the Club, Moïse who becomes Tiffany’s friend and then betrays her, and N’Diop, the African doctor. In post-colonial Balta, the narrative structure again mirrors the social structure as black and white societies exist in parallel, for the most part in isolation from and in ignorance of each other, but intersecting at different points in both confrontational and co-operative ways. In White Spirit, the predominantly black African society is permeated by both whites and whiteness. As in both Ouregano and Balta, a sense of alienation is identifiable on both sides, but in White Spirit black and white fortunes are inextricably interlinked in systems of mutual exploitation. The white European, the young working class Victor, who sells Lola the ‘white spirit’, is just as much ‘exploited as the black Africans who work on the banana plantations.

Whatever Constant’s own complex position and feelings about Africa may be, in post-colonial terms a white European writer writing about Africa is always already suspect of cultural (re)colonisation. Indeed, the term ‘Africa’ itself is unitary, a totalising term, and as such can be criticised for effacing the vast differences that exist within the continent of Africa. Constant’s ‘Africa’ both falls into this trap and evades it. On the one hand, her fictional Africa is the Africa of her memory, conflating specificity of place into an amalgam of all the places in which she has lived in reality. On the other hand, by using fictional place names (Ouregano, La Mégalo), she is open to criticism for negating the specificity of actual places. Nevertheless, the readings of White Spirit (Chapter 2) and Ouregano and Balta
(Chapter 3) indicate that these novels may present some particular difficulties for the self-conscious post-colonial European reader, who must negotiate a reading position in relation to Constant’s always somewhat stylised characters. Notwithstanding my suggestion that the narrative techniques in *White Spirit* lead such readers to recognise their own complicity with (post-)colonial values and thus to a productive interrogation of their own attitudes, the difficult question of whether the writing and, more pertinently here, the reading of difference is appropriative of that difference is a complex one and remains largely unresolved.

The problematic that Constant’s novels pose for the contemporary reader feeds into more general debates about writing and reading (and interpreting) difference – whether that difference be primarily of race, gender, class, or sexuality. In *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture*, Catherine Belsey makes reference to Toni Morrison’s texts, but feels politically that she should not presume to write about her work in depth for fear of appearing to colonise it (p.92). By means of this strategy, Belsey thus succeeds in neither totally excluding Morrison’s work (and thus opening herself to charges of Eurocentrism) nor risking accusations of tokenism or appropriation by including it in her analysis. Unfortunately, however sensitive this shows Belsey to be, her defensive position may actually result in a construction of difference which itself effaces the specificity of Morrison’s work into a monolithic category of totalising difference (or otherness). It is difficult to see what the limits, implied by her concern not to ‘colonise’ Morrison’s difference, would be. Although ethnic difference would appear to be particularly susceptible to a form of colonisation, Belsey’s decision raises the questions of what the nature of difference must be, and of how different difference has to be, before writing about it for one’s
own purposes becomes colonisation. In the context of the chapter of her book on desire, where she does not hesitate to write about different kinds of sexual desire in post-modern fictions, Belsey’s decision not to write about Morrison because of inhibitions about expropriating black experience suggests not only an anxious awareness of the dangers of post-colonial colonialism, but also perhaps an (over-) investment in race as radical difference.

Such decisions are never easy, but in ‘Experiential Authority and Heterosexuality’, Celia Kitzinger cites Anna Livia’s argument that fiction is a place, indeed must be a place, where we can write (and read) about the experiences of those different from ourselves and that it is better to try to engage with others’ lives than to fear making mistakes and thus exclude the experiences of others from our own. But Kitzinger and Livia emphasise the plurality of their understanding of ‘difference’ and they value writing (and reading) as an approach rather than appropriation, as a movement towards the other rather than a colonising gesture. In these terms, a movement towards co-existence and relations with others through recognition and respect of the different lives and experiences of others is both positive and necessary.

Writing on Maghreb fiction, Winifred Woodhull suggests that, rather than appropriating difference, textual strategies which ‘signal’ a need to investigate the relations between text production and the material reality of the subjects under discussion, can open up spaces within which difference can be read and articulated. Woodhull’s position is that differences as such should be attended to but must also be considered in their socio-political contexts and in relation to the processes by which they are constituted.
These points may not be particularly relevant to Constant as a writer, since she herself declares an explicit concern with writing fiction rather than portraying reality (or engaging with difference), but it would seem to have some pertinence for her readers. As discussed in chapter 2, constructing one’s own identity in differentiation from others (even from fictional characters in reading) may involve hierarchical judgements about those (fictional) others’ differences. If reading itself is not to be implicated in (re)colonisation, then this differentiating process would seem to have to be of Chodorow’s relational kind.

In *White Spirit*, a young, educated, European officer, who prides himself on his post-colonial attitudes of respect for and openness towards local (African) differences, is completely unable to deal with Victor and his relationship with Alexis, the monkey. He feels physically sick and resorts to bigoted comments which surprise even himself (p. 184-85). He appears unable to accept Victor’s difference because he and Victor share too many common factors (age, nationality, language, culture). While he might accept unproblematically an African’s fondness for a monkey, he cannot deal with this in someone who in many other respects is like himself. Consequently, his so-called liberal attitudes are shown to be severely limited and his respect for African differences revealed to be based on the construction and maintenance of an investment in ethnic difference as radical otherness, an otherness which shores up his own sense of self-identity. To the officer, Victor is at once other and same, and the former’s subsequent feelings of vertigo betray a sense of the loss of stable reference points.

This episode highlights the fragility and superficiality of the officer’s attitudes and as such provides a challenge to Constant’s self-conscious (and predominantly
European) readers. The narrative makes us aware first of the character’s extreme
distress at his own reactions, and second, of Victor’s unproblematical reception of the
officer’s comments which to him are stereotypical and thus unsurprising. What the
officer says, therefore, simply reinforces (and confirms his place in) Victor’s own
stereotypical perceptions. In this case, in order to maintain our own identity as
informed post-colonial readers, we need to differentiate ourselves from the young
officer, while also accepting that we may be like him. If we are not to fall into the
same trap as him, such a process must engage us in an honest interrogation and
exploration of the construction of our own post-colonial attitudes. Constant’s
narrative in *White Spirit* consistently deprives the reader of any comfortable position
from which to remain uninvolved in post-colonial colonialism.

The negotiations which the reader is called upon to perform when faced with
the differences of others in texts requires a positive opening-up to others’ differences
and, if this is not to reinforce just another form of prejudicial categorisation, it must
surely also become a process where one learns about oneself as well as about others.
Such discussion necessarily borders on a consideration of the ethical implications of
reading. Ethics are, however, a notoriously problematic area, since the very term
invokes moral judgements and the prescription of norms. Moreover, any proposal of
establishing ethics necessarily raises the question of whose authority is to decide what
those ethics should be.  
37 H. Jill Scott, reading Cixous, states that ‘postcolonialism
must follow in the footsteps of feminism, daring to speak differently while avoiding
essentializing the voice and the marginality of the others it seeks to liberate’.  
38 Scott relates Cixous’s textual practice to a feminist ethics of self-other relations and sets it
up as an example for post-colonial practice. Cixous’s own recommended practices of
writing – and reading – are well-documented. Using Clarice Lispector’s approach as a model, she calls for an opening-up in reading not in order to understand or otherwise reduce differences within texts but to accept, to listen and to be nourished by those differences. She also maintains that reading in this way entails learning about oneself.\textsuperscript{39}

While Cixous’s particular and controversial position in feminism may preclude her from being widely accepted as a spokesperson for a feminist ethics, feminism’s ethical exemplum is nonetheless appreciated beyond a specifically feminist milieu. For example, in Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn, Peter Baker describes feminism as ‘an ethical discourse’ in itself (p.83), arguing that ‘feminism is quite simply one name for ethical practice in our time’ (p.96).\textsuperscript{40} Chanter, following De Lauretis, is, however, more precise:

The ethical impetus behind feminist responses to fundamental questions about how to act together as women, how to communicate with one another in ways that respect the differences between us, and how to remain a politically viable movement cannot help but intersect, and conflict, with questions about how we love and live, what we want for ourselves and for those closest to us, and how we envision, endorse, and enact our friendships with others. (Ethics of Eros, p.20)

Both Baker and Chanter are referring primarily to feminism’s work for change in both personal and political relations with others, but, importantly, Baker is specifically concerned with reading within this framework. In his discussion of the ethical subject of discourse, Baker recognises an inevitable intersubjective violence in reading. In the context of deconstruction, he considers that interpretation, as a form of authority, however sensitive, is violent: far from being limited to textual violence, it can lead to ‘real-world’ intersubjective violence since the language and thinking it disseminates may reinforce oppressive conditions in reality (p.98). On the other hand,
Lynne Pearce warns that it is readers’ emotional interaction with texts which ‘may blind us’ to their ‘gendered, raced, classed, sexualized’ contexts (Feminism and the Politics of Reading, pp.255-56). In fact, however, Pearce’s argument ultimately parallels that of Baker: the power relations of reading, however private, can connect up with real socio-political power relations. There is of course a difference between the ethical implications of critical reading and interpretation, which may be made public through writing or teaching, and those of individual, personal and private reading, although both J. Hillis Miller, in The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James and Benjamin, and Baker refer to ethical decisions in terms of responsibility. To whom or for what the reader is thus responsible is, however, a matter for contention: for Miller, it is for the effects of one’s reading; for Michel Tournier (who, in Michel Tournier, also speaks of the responsibility of reading), it is for the work the reader is co-creating in his/her reading (p.195); and for Baker, it is for one’s own interpretive decisions. None of these formulations is simple, however, since Miller questions the changing nature of the ‘I’ who reads; Tournier betrays, perhaps, a certain authorial anxiety in relation to his readers and in Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn, Baker maintains that: ‘the ethical subject is always already caught and defined by [...] frameworks that are not of one’s conscious choice or making, but that nonetheless demand more choice and decision-making than one could ever possibly accomplish’ (p.129). Every ethical response is caught up in existing ethical systems, and however patient and respectful the ethical subject may be in his/her approach to (or reading of) others’ differences, this response is necessarily defined by and within those systems. Baker identifies the ethical aspect of deconstruction as an attitude of openness and of preparing oneself for ‘the arrival of
the other' (p. 114), although such an approach may well, and indeed must prove impossible (if any prescriptive notion of ethics is to be avoided). Nonetheless, however impossible it may be, Baker’s conclusion implies that readers as ethical subjects must accept the responsibility of theorising their reading and their interpretations, of remaining self-consciously aware of both the textual context and their own socio-cultural contexts, of considering their reading as an ethical response to the text. This may indeed seem far removed from the joys of the speculative liberation of the individual reading experience. However, if the idea of ‘ethical response’ is interpreted, not as a prescriptive mode, nor as a moral judgement, but as accepting responsibility for a personal approach to different, singular others on the part of a self-conscious, self-aware reader, the intersubjective nature of reading does not negate but rather, enriches its pleasures.

EXAMPLE 2:

The ethical responsibility of reading and interpretation is a challenge which faces the character, Queria, in Christiane Baroche’s *L’Hiver de beauté*. However, in the episode under discussion, this is of a political rather than a textual nature. In the final part of Baroche’s novel, Queria, arriving in Rio at carnival time, comes upon a naked woman running along the street pursued by two men. In Catholic countries, the carnival is a pre-Lenten feast, and Rio’s carnival is world-famous for the extent and extravagance of its spectacle. Elaborate costumes, masks, parades, music, eating, and drinking are part of the festivities to which huge crowds are drawn. In the carnival, identities are abandoned, categories are blurred, hierarchies are reversed, normal laws are suspended, limits are transgressed. Carnival operates outside the usual rules of the
social order, but, in itself, carnival is not a model for permanent change, since at its end, everything reverts back as it was before and old identities, categories, hierarchies and laws regain their former power.

The episode of the two men pursuing the woman takes place in the dying stages of the carnival. The social order is beginning to be re-established, but vestiges of carnival still remain. The woman, ‘une jeune négresse’, is naked and ‘hurlant de rire ou d’effroi’ (p.287). Neither the reader nor Queria have any knowledge of the circumstances of her nakedness, and the narrative’s description of her screams does nothing to explain it; rather, the very ambiguity of the description precludes any certainty of interpretation. We do not know whether the scenario is taking place within the carnival (dis)order or outside it; we have no way of knowing whether the chase is playful or serious, whether the naked black woman is in fact screaming with laughter or whether she is screaming with fear. There is no doubt, however, that she is running away from the two men.

There are several possible ways of interpreting this scenario. If we are to consider that the woman is screaming with laughter, the chase is likely to be playful (carnival), and the woman willingly has an active part. Indeed, it may be her game, and she may be in control. If, on the other hand, we are to consider that she is screaming with fear, the scenario is likely to be one of potential rape. Radical feminism theorises the ever-present threat of male sexual violence against women as one of the forces which maintain patriarchy in place. Sexual violence is intrinsically implicated in sexual politics. Furthermore, pertinent to interpretations of this scenario is the argument of black feminists that black women are enclosed in, and judged by,
stereotypes of black women’s sexuality which assume that black women are sexually available and promiscuous.⁴²

If, however, we are to consider a third interpretive option for this episode, it could be that the chase itself is ambiguous. What started as a game is no longer one. The woman has lost control and her screams of laughter change (are perhaps even in the process of changing) to screams of fear. It may be that she is running from one order to another, from carnival to social order, from play to law. Paradoxically, however, the very ambiguity of this interpretive option is likely to lead to polarised responses. On the one hand is a claim for provocation, for exonerating the potential aggressors, for blaming the potential victim for bringing sexual violence on herself, while, on the other hand is the claim that ‘no means no’, that a woman screaming with fear with two men in pursuit, irrespective of the circumstances of her nakedness, does not want (or at least, no longer wants) to have sex with them of her own free-will.

In *L’Hiver de beauté*, the reader of this ambiguous scenario is not left for long in an interpretive dilemma, since Queria soon intervenes. As a scene of potential rape in the final part of *L’Hiver de beauté*, this episode acts as both an echo and a counter-weight to the scene of the encounter between Isabelle and Hector in the first part of the novel, a scene which Queria wilfully interprets, indeed creates (writes), as rape (see chapter 2, pp.69-72). On the second occasion, as on the first, faced with yet another ambiguous situation, Queria decides to interpret the scene as one of male aggression rather than one of female provocation or seduction. Once again she intervenes, but on this occasion her action is practical rather than textual. She puts out her foot and trips up the first man, who falls, bringing the other man down with him.
This time, instead of creating a (fictional) rape scene, she actively prevents a (possibly) real one. By tripping up the men, Queria gives the woman the chance to get away if she does indeed wish to escape. By the time the men pick themselves up, the woman has disappeared. This, together with the men’s reaction, which is to advance on Queria ‘l’air mauvais’, would seem to confirm that their pursuit was no game (to them at least), and that, carnival or not, the violent excesses of patriarchy are steadfastly in place (p.287).

Queria’s action changes the course of events: the men are thwarted; the woman escapes. She makes an interpretive decision, and her intervention gives the woman rather than the men the benefit of the doubt. As it happens, her reading of the situation appears to be justified by the outcome, but, nonetheless, she is forced to assume full responsibility for her interpretation since she is left alone to face the men. Theoretically, as a woman on her own, Queria is just as much a potential victim of rape as the naked woman.

In terms of feminist politics, Queria’s intervention is proven to be not only an act of sisterhood for another woman, but also an act of defiance. When the men advance on her in a threatening way, unlike the naked woman, she does not run away, retreat, nor even shrink back in fear. Rather, she takes control of the situation: smiling, she draws her hair away from her face and looks directly at them with her one eye. Following her operation, Queria’s face is no longer ugly or frightening, but the men, intimidated, freeze and then walk away. By standing her ground, by refusing the role of victim, Queria rejects the role conventionally allotted to her as a woman in patriarchy. From an object of desire (and/or a potential object of sexual violence), first Queria’s action and then her look, enable her to become a singular, powerful
subject, and as such upset traditional patriarchal sexual politics. Writing on Bakhtin, Michael Holquist suggests that ‘carnival makes familiar relations strange’, and indeed, as the men walk away, one of them crosses his fingers, and, murmuring the words of a prayer, declares that Queria must be associated with Macumba, a fringe religious cult. The men thus contain this threatening (castrating) woman by marginalising her; they save face by (re)turning to carnival order (and to superstition) in order to explain to themselves the effect of Queria’s defiant action and to justify their withdrawal. While this (re)containment may dilute the effect of Queria’s actions to some extent, while it may indeed allow the men to retain their misogynist, objectifying attitudes towards women, it does not negate the fact that Queria changes the course of events and prevents the rape of a woman.

Queria’s role as reader of the scenario suggests that this carnival episode may be read as a trope for textuality. This involves more than just a slippage from the interpretation of a situation to the reading of a text, however, since a tropological reading is justified by the extent of metafictional mirroring in *L’Hiver de beauté*, in which Queria is both a writer and a reader (and, pertinently, alter ego of Baroche’s readers). Moreover, in Bakhtinian theory, carnival is associated with the novel. In *Dialogism*, Holquist states that: ‘carnival, like the novel, is a means for displaying otherness’ (p.89). During carnival and in the novel, the usual rules of the social order are suspended, leaving a space where difference can be inscribed. As reader of the chase scenario, Queria intervenes by putting out her foot. Her sisterly act changes the course of events, and in a local but permanent way, she re-writes the patriarchal script. The carnival episode in *L’Hiver de beauté* indicates that even if traditional hierarchies fall back into place, even if the patriarchal system as such cannot (yet) be
overthrown, the intervention of the individual (writer or reader) can make a limited
but permanent difference to its lived reality. Indeed, on a textual level, Baroche’s
novel, by means of its relations with Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, itself
intervenes in a re-writing of the traditional patriarchal script of the French literary
canon (see chapter 2, pp.115-16), and thus the carnival episode can also be seen as
emblematic of the novel as a whole.

Notwithstanding its tropological function, however, the carnival episode in
*L’Hiver de beauté* in itself generates speculative, creative reader intervention into
patriarchal politics. Baroche’s novel ends with the implication that the loving
relationships between Isabelle and Armand-Marie and between Queria and Barney
are unlikely to follow conventional patriarchal formulations of sexual politics. The
carnival episode takes place immediately prior to the scene where Queria, with ‘une
faim rassurante’ for food (rather than for passion) finally encounters Barney on the
beach (p.288). This scene marks the beginning of their love affair, but it is no
clichéd scenario of pseudo-platonic completeness. Both Barney and Queria are
searching for one another but they are also enjoying the beach ‘seul[s] et gai[s]’, each
in their own solitude (p.289). Moreover, Queria’s need that Barney ‘m’aime mais pas
trop [...] qu’il soit là mais pas trop’ is not that of the traditional romantic heroine
about to embark on an all-consuming love affair (p.289). Both Barney and Queria
desire the relationship which they are about to begin, but realistically they each wish
to retain their own independent lives.

As a carnivalesque inscription of ‘otherness’, Queria’s triumph against male
aggression in the chase scenario and her refusal to be contained within the patriarchal
hierarchy foreshadow and prefigure her future relations with Barney. Furthermore,
neither Queria’s reconstructive surgery nor her forthcoming love affair are unconditional capitulations to the patriarchal system. Instead, they are realistic, individual negotiations within it which allow her to live it differently. Baroche’s readers are thus encouraged to speculate on the possibilities of a different arrangement of sexual politics in the relationship that will develop between Queria and Barney. Moreover, the chase scenario, which takes place on the uncertain and ambiguous borders between carnival and the re-establishing social order, acts as yet another image of the blurring between fiction and reality in this novel, impelling its readers to take their speculations beyond their reading and into the reality of their own lives. The carnival episode in *L’Hiver de beauté* suggests that, as individual readers, we can make our own interventions into the traditional, patriarchal script, and thus in different ways we can make a difference to the way we live our own relationships both in personal and in political terms.

EXAMPLE 3:

If Baroche’s *L’Hiver de beauté* encourages the reader to speculate about different loving relations, Hélène Cixous’s *Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu* provides some interesting food for thought. Indeed, Cixous, most consistently of all the three fiction writers under discussion, is concerned with writing and thinking difference in all its forms. In ‘Le Sexe ou la tête’, she identifies the importance of working on different aspects of ‘le couple’ in order to effect cultural change: the couple in binary thinking, as the relation of one polarised term to another; the male/female couple, as in the gendered political relation of domination/subordination in phallogocentric culture; and the individual couple, as in the personal and loving
relations of one person with an/other (p.7). Her essay, ‘Tancrède continue’, for example, brings together many of the issues concerning difference which she explores in more sustained ways in her fiction. In this essay, Cixous shows both how ordinary language restricts the ways we (can) think about sexual difference and loving relations, and how poetical language and music offer more effective ways of expressing different formulations of it. As a woman’s voice sings the part of the male character, Tancrède, in Rossini’s opera of the same name, this character is both a man and a woman. This can be heard musically, in the voice, but it is very difficult to express in language, even in poetical writing. In her self-conscious attempts to inscribe different ways of being a man and being a woman, Cixous disrupts grammatical rules to mix linguistic genders: ‘une Tancrède’ (p.144), ‘il est amante’ (p.154), and runs gendered personal pronouns together to make new terms: ‘une ellil et une ilelle’ (p.147). The transformative effects of such textual inscriptions must be, however, somewhat limited, since they would appear to remain on a conceptual level. For the reader, Cixous’s poetical explorations in ‘Tancrède continu’ may be conceptually revelatory, but are less likely to be transferable to real, material life. On the contrary, however, her recent fictional texts, Déluge, Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu, La Fiancée juive de la tentation, can be read as an ongoing analysis of different aspects of loving relations on both emotional and experiential levels. This section considers how one of these texts, namely Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu, encourages creative readings which, despite Cixous’s non-realist style, connect readers with their own (potential) realities and relationships.

The figure of Beethoven, who is central to Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de
Dieu, is particularly interesting, since for much of her writing career, Cixous has
steadfastly declared that she could never write ‘as a man’, nor even use a male narrator, because as a woman, it is not possible for her to feel or to experience the feelings or desires of the body of a man (*Writing Differences*, p.151). Latterly, however, as she explains in ‘De la Scène de l’Inconscient’, her work for the theatre has allowed her to explore a different means of expressing alterity, with actors’ bodies incarnating the characters and thus providing a bridge between the writer and the character (p.31). This practice has more recently overflowed somewhat into her fiction texts. In *Manne aux Mandelstams aux Mandelas*, for example, Nelson Mandela and Ossip Mandelstam, as real but quasi-mythical figures, provide a similar bridge between the author and the textual men she creates, and likewise, in *Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu*, Beethoven, who both is and is not the historical figure, Beethoven, fulfils this function in a text about love. Mandela, Mandelstam, and Beethoven may be well-known figures, but as individual men, they are unknown to most people. Their renown thus always involves a certain mythologisation, fictionalisation and fantasy. Indeed, Beethoven is a mythical figure of the artist dedicated to his work – isolated, idiosyncratic. Cixous’s technique of using mythicised figures as bodies for individual men allows, and indeed engages, the readers’ co-creativity, leaving space for them, in reading, to ‘write in’ their own fantasies and imaginative speculations.

Beethoven might, however, appear to be a rather surprising figure to choose in connection with loving relations since, although he was a man who was fascinating to both men and women, he is renowned for being unable to commit himself to a lasting emotional relationship. Nevertheless, Cixous’s narrator chooses Beethoven because his writing – his music, his self-reflective diary and his letters, among which a now-
famous love letter to an unknown ‘Immortal Beloved’ – suggest and provide a way of writing about love.  

Beethoven provides Cixous with a desiring male figure, and more importantly, a ‘feminine’ desiring male figure, through whom to explore the creative potential of loving relations. Cixous suggests in ‘Sorties’ that artists (men and women) have to open themselves up to (sexual) differences within themselves in order to create. As ‘un homme si largement environné de musique’ (Beethoven à jamais, p.76), a musician and artistic creator, the Beethoven figure in Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu is a ‘feminine’ man, different, unusual, inexplicable:

Mais dans cette histoire l’homme pourrait tout aussi bien être une femme, pensons-nous, et simultanément nous pensons pourtant cet être-là est un homme en tout. C’est, dans la région du coeur, une hypersensibilité, une source d’alerte, au sein du feu, le point du lait. (p.131)

He has qualities which are so often – and stereotypically – associated with women (sensitivity, intuition, passion, maternity), and yet he is also very much what we consider to be a (real) man.

Nevertheless, although Beethoven’s words of love exist – in the love-letter – in Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu, Cixous uses few of them. She does, however, borrow his style. Beethoven’s letter is punctuated by dashes, which Cixous’s narrator refers to as Beethoven’s ‘style haletant’, a style common to Beethoven’s correspondence generally (p.70). In Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu, the section entitled ‘Lettre à l’Immortelle Bien-Aimée’ is written in this way, with dashes between phrases and sentences, but the words are the narrator’s (and Cixous’s) interpretation (fictionalisation) of the passion and emotion with which the composer wrote his love-letter. Rather than his actual words, Cixous’s fictional
version is an interpretation of Beethoven’s voice, in the sense of the Kristevan
semiotic or indeed of the Cixousian ‘feminine’ – the emotion and passion of the voice
detectable in the interstices of the sentences he wrote.

Like Cixous’s other fiction texts, *Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu* crosses traditional boundaries of genre. The form of the text slips between prose,
poetical prose and verse, between narrative, diaries, notebooks, letters and songs. The
language and syntax are rhythmic, an echo of the music which is central to the text in
the figure of Beethoven, in references to his compositions, and in the musical terms
which structure the text. Narrative levels proliferate: Beethoven, a man, a woman, the
narrator, the Author. Slippages between these different narratives mean that it is not
always clear who is speaking. The love affair between Beethoven and his Immortal
Beloved, epitomised in and by his love-letter, is echoed by, interweaves with, and
slips between that of a contemporary couple – ‘elle’ and ‘lui’. The slippage, and
indeed the lack of consistent differentiation, between the two couples intensify the
reader’s uncertainty since it is not always possible to tell whether the pronoun ‘il’, the
initial ‘B’, or even the name Beethoven, relate to the figure of Beethoven himself or
to the contemporary man. ‘Elle’ and ‘lui’, the couple, thus unnamed, therefore also
figure more conceptually as a couple in love (any couple in love, even perhaps all
couples in love).

This love story is, however, no conventional tragic or fleeting romance.
*Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu* is concerned with the possibilities of a
lasting passion, at once evoking and differentiating itself from such great tragic
romances as Tristan and Isolde, as well as from the trite clichés of much
contemporary romance (pp. 42-43). ‘Philtre’ is a key-word, at once standing for the
magic and the timelessness as well as the lived reality of love: ‘le philtre’, a
magical love-potion; its homonym, ‘le filtre’, the filter of Beethoven’s love affair
through which Cixous writes about the timelessness of love; and the filter coffee
which the lovers drink in a cafe in reality. The ‘Dieu’ of the title makes reference to
the transcendental and immortal dimension of both love and artistic creation (writing,
music). Love and art transcend time and reality and enable us to experience extreme
heights of emotion. Artistic inspiration frequently takes on mystical qualities in
Cixous’s work. In *Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu*, love too is mystical.
Falling in love is magical. In the text – and in life – ‘dieu’ is invoked at moments of
intense passion; perhaps, Cixous’s narrator goes as far as to suggest, the word and the
concept, ‘dieu’, exist because of the need to give expression to such moments.

Despite reference to external reality (the cafe, streets, traffic, telephones,
planes), *Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu*, in common with all of Cixous’s
fiction, is primarily concerned with internal reality – with feelings and emotions – and
with the importance of writing. We know of Beethoven’s relationship with his
Immortal Beloved only because of the love letter he wrote – an ode, and as it turns
out, an attestation to the immortality of his love. In Cixous’s text, diaries, notebooks,
letters (real and potential), songs and narrative express the emotional experiences of a
love affair: the intensity of life, fear of loss, joy, hurt, togetherness and separation, the
implications of becoming a couple.

Following on from her previous fictional text, *Déluge*, which focuses on the
pain of loving and hurting, Cixous turns in *Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu*
to the close analysis of some positive, creative aspects of relationships. Beethoven’s
voice is present in the promises the man makes to the woman, promises which are
part of the (self-)creation of the couple and of their creativity. Two of these promises warrant particular attention for their strangeness. The first, ‘je te serai toujours infidèle, comme à moi-même’, is a confession but a promise is contained within it (Beethoven à jamais, pp.71-72). Music comes first in the man’s life and always will – but that does not mean he will betray his beloved. He puts her on an equal footing with himself. To forget himself (his own needs) for his music, is not to betray himself; rather, it is to be true to himself. And so, in this text: ‘A l’infini, fidèle et infidèle se rejoignaient aussi’ (p.72). The binary opposition between fidelity and infidelity is dissolved, the relations between the terms changed, and furthermore, productively, creatively, although perhaps for the reader only momentarily, fidelity is contained within infidelity. When Cixous’s Beethoven declares his infidelity, he is trusting his beloved with a part of himself, and he is pledging that he will be faithful to her.

The second promise, ‘Je ne t’épouserai jamais’ (p.82), is followed by several pages of meditative and interrogative narrative introspection, in which the phrase is examined, explored and discussed by the narrator, on behalf of, and with, not only the woman in the text, but also Cixous’s readers. The phrase perplexes because it is not an answer to a question. There has been no question. It is a free-floating statement: ‘C’est qu’il avait lié “jamais” à “épouserai” d’une voix si caressante. D’ailleurs aucun regret, pas la moindre inflexion de deuil. Ni d’éloignement. Ni de répulsion. Ni d’explication. Ni de sous-entendu’ (p.83). Between the words and meaning is the man’s voice, his tone, his inflections, and in terms of Kristeva’s semiotic, this is what gives meaning to the words which are spoken. It is the man’s voice, his intonation,
declaring 'jamais' as if he were saying 'toujours', which insists that this phrase is interpreted as a promise and not a warning (p.83).

In this instance, Cixous's readers are not, however, left to find this interpretation for themselves; it is made abundantly clear in the text. As the woman reflects on the phrase and its meaning, the man repeats it differently, in Beethoven’s 'style haletant’ – for the woman, for himself, for the readers:

Toujours – […] toujours – je ne t'épouserai pas – et jamais je ne t’aurais épousée – et à la fin – jamais – si tu veux bien – je ne t’aurais épousée –
tu m’entends – je t’entends, oui – je veux bien – et je m’entends avec toi t'écouter – goutte à goutte – j’écoute chaque goutte
tomber suivie – tu me suis – oui je te suis – goutte à goutte – et ensuite j’écoute le à qui respire d’une goutte à l’autre – les sons entre les mots je les écoute et là où il n’y a pas de son pour faire la liaison – j’écoute le silence qui célèbre le temps – (p.87)

In *Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu*, as in Cixous’s subsequent fictional text, *La Fiancée juive de la tentation*, marriage is not held to be the ultimate desirable destination. Conventional marriage is deemed to be an appropriative and sterile relationship. Nonetheless, the rejection of marriage does not necessarily preclude commitment, and indeed in both texts, the pledge or promise between lovers is what is considered to be most valuable and creative.

Whether or not Cixous’s readers are seduced by the play between language and meaning in these promises may depend just as much on their own subjective position as on her textual virtuosity. Nevertheless, the non-conventional promises and, in particular, the long process of reflection connected with the latter one, would seem to tend to engage readers in ongoing (creative) reflection of their own – about language, about meaning, about promises, about relationships, about their relationships.
Indeed, it is the way in which the readers are engaged with Cixous's writing that encourages them to read creatively and speculatively. *Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu* ends on a performative, creative, note, as the couple say ‘jetaime’. The words are run together; the phrase is a cliché. It is clear, however, that this couple have dispensed with the empty, automatic promises that so often go with conventional declarations of love. Their promises, and the phrase ‘jetaime’, are meaningful in the context of their own relationship. The creativity that is ever-present throughout Cixous’s text, in music, writing, interpretation, fiction, poetical language, and love, together with the plethora of slippages, lead her readers to read creatively — in the interstices between historical periods, between narratives, between figures, between language and meaning, between imagination and reality, and between the text and real life.\(^5\)

Cixous’s poetical evocation of internal, emotional reality makes the slippage from non-realist text to the lived reality of the reader an easy, even an inevitable, passage. Far from making the unacceptable assumption that everyone thinks and feels like Cixous’s narrators and textual figures, however, this statement is intended to imply that, particularly given the creative engagement which her writing elicits, the passage between text and reality is an open-ended and individual one; one that even, it might be suggested, goes beyond the boundaries of particular sexualities. This is not to suggest that readers simply transpose the sex of their preferred partner onto Cixous’s textual figures or that the couples can be read as in specifically homosexual rather than heterosexual relationships, although both these transpositions may perhaps occur in reading.\(^5\) Rather, since love and loving relations are the real subjects of this text, it is to suggest that the questions that the text raises about how we love one
another, and the individual creativity that love encourages, may be relevant to many readers irrespective of their own particular sexual orientation.

In *Beethoven à jamais ou l'existence de Dieu*, Beethoven’s music and Cixous’s poetry encourage a dialogue between text and reader on a different dimension – in the interstices – beyond the limitations of ordinary language and the enclosure of binary thinking. The textual space becomes a creative space, a space of individual negotiation for the reader, who is thus encouraged to recognise that realities of difference are to be found within the self, and that the potential of those realities can be realised in his/her own lived loving relationships. It can of course be argued that creative reading leads only to further, new fictions, fictions that we tell about ourselves and our relationships. However, psychoanalysis, if nothing else, testifies to our need to tell (and be told) stories about ourselves, and it shows how we are those stories. Internal reality and external reality are interdependent, and so, similarly, are fiction and real life. Reading in the interstices of Cixous’s *Beethoven à jamais ou l'existence de Dieu* leads us from the text back to our own real lives, and, also, most importantly, it leads us to recognise (and perhaps to realise) the creative potential of writing, of reading, and of love.

**SUMMARY**

This discussion of ‘difference’ affirms the creative potential of literature with particular respect to (feminist) concerns with change – change of social structures, of individual lives, of thought, of meaning, of relationships. Literature offers a speculative arena for the experimentation and exploration of ways of thinking and being differently. Reading is important, not only as part of the textual process, but,
according to Kristeva, as an experience in itself. In this formulation, reading fiction plays a valuable part in the individual’s sense of self.

The self-other(s) relationship is crucial to all these concerns, and is consistently being re-worked and re-thought in self-conscious interrogations of subjectivity in both psychical and political terms. The examples chosen show how reading intervenes into fictional portrayals and explorations of difference, as an experience and as an engagement. Constant’s ‘Africa’ novels highlight the problematics of reading difference(s) and suggest that reading might be considered in terms of an ethical responsibility; Baroche’s carnival episode emphasises the importance of individual intervention as a contribution to change in power relations in both personal and political spheres; and Cixous’s *Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu* is an example of the creativity of individual negotiations and explorations of different formulations of loving relationships.

Crucially, none of these examples offers utopian solutions to the problematic of reading difference. Constant’s novels never allow a comfortably uninvolved reading position and neither Baroche’s nor Cixous’s fiction denies the power of political investment and of cultural expectations which are involved in social and personal relations. The difficult negotiations entailed in trying to live relations with others differently is never underestimated. In all of these examples, the emphasis is on individual (reading) encounters and engagements. The fictional texts discussed encourage reader engagement but they are not prescriptive; indeed, their over-riding generosity is that they encourage their readers to undertake individual interrogation and speculation.
The passage from text to life can only be effected by way of the reading experience. As these examples of Baroche’s, Cixous’s and Constant’s work show, texts which engage the reader and thus foster a productive and creative interdependence between text and life are those which enable differences inscribed by the inventive strategies of fiction writing to flow into – and to effect change in – not only the reader’s own sense of self but also relations of both a personal and a political nature.

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2 See, for example, Annie Leclerc, Parole de femme for a celebration of women’s biological specificity, and Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (London: Routledge, 1990) for an influential yet somewhat controversial constructionist account of gender.
7 Chanter, among others, stresses the cultural specificity of any understanding of either nature or culture, and also argues that they are interdependent terms (Ethics of Eros, pp.123-24). See also Diana Fuss, Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference (London: Routledge, 1989), who highlights the internal contradictions on both sides of the essentialism/constructionism binary as her contribution to the essentialism debate. Like Braidotti, Fuss also considers Irigaray’s essentialism is ‘a key strategy’ and ‘a lever of displacement’, and she considers that Irigaray is neither prescriptive nor promotes a single essence of ‘woman’ (p.72).
See, for example, Lillian S. Robinson, 'Treason our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon', in The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 105-21. Julia Kristeva's Les Samouraïs (Paris: Fayard, 1990), for example, whether it is a homage to, a pastiche of, or intertextual dialogue with Simone de Beauvoir's Les Mandarins (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), could be read in terms of the author's agonistic relations with a female intellectual precursor. In an interview at the time of the novel's publication, Kristeva herself lays claim to the humour of not only her intertextual 'wink' at Beauvoir but also of a certain 'dialogue' with Virginia Woolf: 'I wanted to write a popular novel, very sensual and ironic' (Cultural Strangeness and the Subject in Crisis', in Julia Kristeva Interviews, ed. Ross Mitchell Guberman, pp. 35-58 [pp. 57-58]).


Suleiman is referring to Cixous's 'écriture féminine' (see chapter 1) and to a woman writing her difference (differently) as being intrinsically subversive. However, she does not equate women's writing with 'feminine writing' here but follows Cixous's statement that women are in a privileged position to be able to practise it.

See, for example, Julia Kristeva, La Révolution du langage poétique; Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties'; Hélène Cixous, 'Le Rire de la Méduse'; Wolfgang Iser, Prospecting; Catherine Belsey, Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). Belsey and Iser specifically emphasise the role of the reader in the transformative process.


See also Julia Kristeva, Les Nouvelles Maladies de l'âme, for a discussion of psychical problems which Kristeva identifies as pertaining to modern civilisation.

The first section of Kristeva's Sens et non-sens de la révolte is devoted to explaining the etymological basis to her use of the term 'révolte' in this text. This includes the sense of 'un retour temporel' which exceeds 'une remémoration' (recollection) as simple repetition since it involves a displacement and an alteration (renewal) of the subject. She relates this return/renewal to Proust, to her theory of the subject, le sujet en procès, and to psychoanalysis (p. 111).


See, for example, Luce Irigaray, Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un, Sexes et parentés; Le Temps de la différence, Je, tu, nous, J'aime à toi; 'The Question of the Other', in Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism, ed. Lynne Huffer, Yale French Studies, 87 (1995), pp. 7-19.


It is not my intention here to construct racial difference as an idealised or even privileged example of difference, nor to construct racial or ethnic difference as the only form of radical otherness, but the post-colonial context of both the writing and the reading of Constant's 'Africa' novels raises searching questions about the writing and reading of difference.

My use of 'post-colonial' here is intellectual rather than material, and makes implicit reference to Edward Said's contention that all representations 'are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer', Edward W. Said, Orientalism (London: Penguin, 1991), p.272.

Without denying the need to prioritise specific differences at certain times and in certain contexts, I would argue that differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. cannot actually be thought separately, since, for example, a woman is not a woman in isolation from other aspects of her identity (see chapter 1 for a conceptualisation of the dynamism of the relations between such different aspects of identity).


See, for example, Paule Constant, Interview, L'Officiel d'Afrique, 10 (December 1983-January 1984), pp.34-35.


See, for example, Hélène Cixous and Kenner, Reading with Clarice Lispector; Hélène Cixous, Readings, The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva, ed. and trans. Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

Peter Baker, Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn (Gainesville/Tallahassee/Tampa/Boca Raton/Pensacola/Orlando/Miami/Jacksonville: University Press of Florida, 1995).


See, for example, Susan Brownmiller, Against our Will; Kate Millett, Sexual Politics; Angela Davis, Women, Race and Class (London: The Women's Press, 1982).

The politics of the look are a concern of feminist film theory wherein the woman figures as spectacle for the male gaze. See, for example, Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Feminisms: A Reader, ed. Maggie Humm (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp.348-53; see also Kaja Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988) on despecularisation of the male and hyperspecularisation of the female subject, and on the association of the gaze with knowledge, pp.24-26; Luce Irigaray, Speculum de l'autre femme is a textual example of a woman's appropriation of the look. In L'Hiver de beauté, Queria is able to appropriate the look despite – or perhaps because of – having only one eye.

Macumba is an Afro-Brazilian religion, a mix of traditional African religions, European culture, Brazilian spiritualism, and Roman Catholicism, and some sects also reflect Hindu and Buddhist influences. The orthodox Christian church attempts to combat the sects but they flourish, practising rituals, sacrifices, dances and trances, spreading to urban areas like Rio where the white middle class are sometimes involved (Encyclopaedia Britannica).
Although carnival transgresses the social order, the transgression itself is subject to another law/order (that of or within the carnival). See Julia Kristeva, 'Le Mot, le dialogue et le roman', in Séméiotiké, pp.143-73 (p.152).

The cross-cultural nature of Macumba suggests connections with the containment of threatening women in different patriarchal cultures, and, given Queria's look and the men's (momentary) petrification, in particular with the figure of the Medusa of Greek myth, which is, in fact, a leitmotif in L'Hiver de beauté. In (Un)Like Subjects: Women, Theory, Fiction (London: Routledge, 1993), Gerardine Meaney emphasises the appropriation of the power of the Medusa's look by Ovid's Perseus, who, after killing her, uses her head as a weapon (pp.28-32).

Julia Kristeva makes the point that carnival itself is an ambiguous amalgam of 'scène et vie' ('Le Mot, le dialogue et le roman', p.161), and thus the situating of the chase scenario in L'Hiver de beauté on the borders between carnival and reality acts as an intensification of that already existing ambiguity.

In this respect, Robert Con Davis evaluates Cixous's post-feminist credentials as an 'oppositional critic'; see Robert Con Davis, 'Woman as Oppositional Reader: Cixous on Discourse', Papers on Language and Literature, 24 (1988), pp.265-82.


See Maynard Solomon, Beethoven (London: Cassell, 1978), who cites the Egyptian initiation inscription which the composer kept on his work table: 'HE IS OF HIMSELF ALONE, AND IT IS TO THIS ALONENESS THAT ALL THINGS OWE THEIR BEING.' (p.157). A man is at his most creative and productive on his own. Beethoven's total dedication to his music seems to have precluded any close long-term relationships.

Beethoven's apparently unsent 'Letter to the Immortal Beloved' was found among his papers after his death. For many years, the circumstances of this letter, and the identity of the 'Immortal Beloved', puzzled biographers and researchers. Solomon's theory as to her identity is now widely accepted. She was Antonie Brentano, a married woman, and Beethoven a family friend. Their love affair therefore had to remain a secret, and indeed it did, with the love letter as the only evidence of its existence.


The terms Dieu and dieu are ambiguous in Cixous's fiction, since sometimes they are used literally and sometimes metaphorically, and frequently this very ambiguity is exploited. In the body of the text of Beethoven à Jamais ou l'existence de Dieu, the word is most often spelt without a capital letter. The title itself is ambiguous, since in all instances in the book, the whole of the title is spelt in capital letters. Frequently, the term 'dieu' in Cixous's work makes reference to artistic inspiration and also to writing itself. See Catherine Clément, 'Cixous la sauvage', Magazine littéraire, 280 (September 1990), pp.76-77, for a discussion of Cixous's mysticism and the god-figures in her fiction.

Cixous's position on the connections between the effects of art and love would seem to correspond to Kristeva's valorisation of both love and art for their role in opening up the psyche (see John Lechte, Julia Kristeva, p.184).

The practical application of such open-ended creativity is prefigured by Roland Barthes who suggests that Beethoven's music should be read and drawn 'dans une praxis inconnue', by which he means it should be creatively interpreted and written anew (by the musician, by the listener). To compose music is to 'donner à faire' ('Musica Practica', in Roland Barthes, Oeuvres complètes (1966-1973), [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1994], II, pp.835-38 [p.837]). Similarly, Cixous herself suggests that the generosity of women's writing is to 'donner le départ' in the sense of faire cadeau du départ, permettre le départ, permettre les ruptures, les "parties", les partitions, les séparations... , in other words to (re)present possibilities, and the conditions of possibility, of difference ('Le Sexe ou la tête', p.14).

See, for example, Emma Wilson, Sexuality and the Reading Encounter, p.32, although generally Wilson considers Cixous's texts as unsettling rather than securing the reader's identity.
CONCLUSION

Having taken as my point of departure Cixous's claim that writing for women has cultural, psychological and political implications beyond the personal fulfilment of individual creation, I have sought to investigate the transformative potential of literature. For Cixous, the expression of women's own voices, bodies and perspectives in fiction by women writers is an important means of countering the historical cultural silencing of women that she identifies. Arguably even more liberating, however, is her insistence that speculative and creative inscriptions of new (fictional) realities have the potential to contribute to changing perceptions of women's identities. Cixous's position would thus seem to imply that the way in which writing is received and interpreted must be part of the process of change; it is precisely this point that has been the subject of my enquiry. In this respect I chose to focus on identity and to explore the interactions which might take place between the text and the identity of the reader during and as a result of (the act of) reading.

My approach to reading formulates it as a dialogue between the individual reader and the text. This framework accounts for the interplay of power relations involved in the way a reader is positioned by – or positions him or herself to – the text, and it also allows for reader participation in the creation of its meaning. Consequently, a politics of reading underpins my investigation during the course of which I have identified a dual outcome: textual effects which position the reader co-exist with opportunities for creative readings. Textual authority is thus in dynamic play with textual generosity. In Baroche's *L'Hiver de beauté*, for example, readers are both drawn into the text (by means of doubling, orality, jokes, confidences) and engaged with it (by means of multiple viewpoints,
unsettling episodes, uncertain characters, narrators or chronology); in this way they are encouraged towards active, creative, interpretive readings.

While reading is cast as an individual, subjective experience, all the chapters in some way or another emphasise the connections with collective identities that individual readers may make in their reading. For example, in *L'Hiver de beauté*, Queria can identify with Isabelle despite the historical and cultural differences between them because she recognises certain common factors in women's situation in patriarchal societies, whether these be in eighteenth-century Europe or twentieth-century South America. In a different way, Constant's 'Tiffany' novels link into a number of collective identities (race, childhood, gender) depending on the perspective of the individual reader. Nonetheless, the loss of a sense of self that Constant's little girl characters display is a common feature of the psychological development of women specifically. Women readers may therefore be able to recognise in these novels their own sense of disconnection from the strong self of their girlhood. In this instance, gender may be a determining factor in reader positioning, but it is certainly not always so active and sometimes does not seem to come into play at all. The examples in Chapter 2 testify that identification in reading is a complex and unpredictable matter.

Individual connections with collective concerns (race, gender, sexuality) may in themselves be political ventures and lead to concrete changes in individual lives as they do for Queria in *L'Hiver de beauté*; alternatively, they may simply create a valuable sense of belonging. Baroche's *La Rage au bois dormant*, however, suggests that a somewhat different outcome is also possible. This novel, concerned with different kinds of loss, posits remembering as a creative activity and as part of the work of mourning. Reading (about) loss in fiction can undoubtedly initiate a creative remembering such as
this, whether it be by connecting readers with the trauma of collective loss, as in war or as a result of disasters, or with instances of personal loss — through death, abandonment, rejection, ageing, disconnection. In reading (about) loss, the connections the individual reader makes with collective concerns may thus have primarily psychical rather than political implications. The remembering that reading can engender may, I suggest, contribute to the cathartic, reparative processes with which we deal with loss in our lives — processes which, in Kleinian terms, re-work primary loss and bring about psychical renewal, regeneration and a strengthening of the self.

Relations with others are, of course, implicated in individual self-identity in a variety of ways. With this in mind, my analyses serve to illustrate reading’s multifarious interactions with this relational aspect of identity. In Chapter 2, for example, I considered how post-colonial, post-feminist readers of Constant’s *White Spirit* may be able to construct their own identity as aware and active readers against that of the character, Lola, whereas my argument in Chapter 5 precisely stresses the precariousness of such a reading position. In the latter case, I suggested that the violence which is always potentially present in sexual, racial and reading relations raises questions about the ethics of reading. While reading may seductively offer us an escape from the realities of life, the effects of that reading may not be so easily contained. In this light, the text cannot remain for long a safe personal space where in reading we can shore up our own identities both by making identifications and by differentiating ourselves from (textual) others; we have to be prepared to take responsibility for the consequences that reading may have on relations with others in life.

On the other hand, the inter-relationship between text and reality is precisely the means whereby positive change can come about. Indeed, the very self-conscious
textuality of many of the texts under discussion illustrates the interdependence of these two terms. The metafictional texts discussed in Chapter 2, for example, which are about reading as much as about writing, blur the boundaries between the poles of text and reality. Importantly, positive, if sometimes unconventional inscriptions of self-other relations are able to exploit this interdependence by generating productive, creative reader responses – of speculation and of (self-)interrogation.

In Baroche’s novels, her readers are encouraged to co-create her characters and to speculate about, inter alia, the ways in which textual lovers (Queria and Barney; Isabelle and Armand-Marie; Jaime and Elodie) suggest relationships between men and women which might manage to avoid the repetition of traditional (patriarchal) sexual politics. Similarly, productive relations between women in her work, although sometimes surprising or shocking, are (potentially) realistic rather than utopian. In a different way, but equally productive nonetheless, Cixous’s Beethoven à jamais ou l’existence de Dieu, despite its non-realism, offers creative examples of individual negotiations within loving relationships with which the reader might engage. Cixous’s imaginary or mythical (utopian) figures can thus initiate reader interaction just as much as Baroche’s portrayals of realistic but creative individual negotiations of identity and relationships. In many different ways, the identifications, memories, interrogations and speculations that originate in reading can flow into our lives and have an effect on the way in which we see ourselves and others in reality.

As a dialogue between text and reader, reading is likely to be most meaningful and productive when the effects last beyond the moment of the reading of the text, when we are led either out of the text or inwardly into ourselves to reflect upon – and most importantly to ask questions of – the attitudes, relationships, representations and systems
which make up and shape our lives and our identities. Indeed, the ongoing (self-)questioning and creativity of individual readings are crucial to the interaction which must take place between text and life in order that new (textual) representations, interpretations and potentialities can feed into and bring about innovative individual performances in life.

Fiction is widely valued for its oppositional and emancipatory potential, but it is clear that the processes by which new and different representations contribute to change are complex. This study suggests that reading is one such process. However, the exact nature of the flow between text and reality is unlikely to be mappable because it is both unpredictable and varied. Irigaray’s cultural imaginary is one way of conceptualising the process but it is limited to thinking the conditions of possibility of change (the interdependence of the imaginary and the symbolic) rather than addressing how either individual or collective transformation actually comes about. From the examples considered, it would seem that no single conclusion can be drawn; the potential of the individual reading encounter is found to be multiple and open-ended. Nonetheless, for change to come about on any level, it would seem crucial that the individual reader both engages with the text and takes the effects of his/her reading beyond it.

The examples analysed suggest that interaction between the identity of the reader and the text s/he is reading is not only conceptually possible but also practically feasible. Indeed, a number of psychical and political intersections are identifiable. On an individual level, memories and meditations which lead readers within themselves may contribute to psychical renewal and to personal transformation in terms of a stronger sense of self. In both personal and social terms, interrogative and creative speculations on different ways of being and living can potentially contribute to change if they go on to
interact with the lived reality of the reader. In an effort to find a way of understanding how these processes come about, this exploratory and necessarily somewhat speculative study has attempted to theorise and to make explicit what may happen implicitly when we read.

While I have engaged with Irigaray's conditions of possibility of the links between cultural and socio-political change by positing the interdependence of fiction and reality, I have not followed what may be seen as her separatist position. My analysis is certainly situated largely within a framework of feminist theory and based on fiction texts by women but neither its scope nor its findings are necessarily restricted to women readers. My focus on sexual identity, although politically-charged, is methodological rather than exclusionary, and it acts as an illustration of the implications of my research rather than serving as its defining characteristic. My conceptual framework is, I would therefore suggest, valid and applicable beyond the limits of this current project and indeed beyond the confines of women's identity. Whether fiction writing is fantasy, fable or plausible reality, its new and creative inscriptions of identity are the necessary raw material, the stuff of fantasy and imagination, with which individual readers can connect and engage. In this respect, a creative (interrogative or speculative) wondering which exceeds the wonder of reading may be the first step to change. Feminism's slogan that the personal is political is undoubtedly relevant to this process, but its philosophy should not be restricted to women. It may be difficult and fraught with risk for both men and women to find and perform different ways of living, of loving, of being, of relating to others, but individual creativity and individual interventions in both private and public lives can make a difference.
The complexity and the importance of the reading process identified by my project and highlighted by my methodology would suggest that there is much scope for further explorations of interactions between texts and identities of all kinds. In particular, however, the importance of mothering relations for women's identity points to the need for a broader view of new, emerging discourses of motherhood in contemporary fiction.

Work on the changing nature of mothering and motherhood and its intersections with women's identity is on-going, but the topic could be productively extended to call into question in a more specific way than I have been able to in this thesis the use of the term 'mothering' – as a role, as a function, as a variety of acts, as a relation. This would involve taking into account a wider range of alternative parenting arrangements and it would also entail an investigation of the differences between what is – and might be – understood by such terms as 'paternal parenting', 'fathering' and 'mothering by men'. The findings of Chapter 4 suggest, I would hope, the beginnings of a whole new project.

My approach to reading in this study has been to posit it as a dialogue. At the end of the project, I still consider this formulation to be valid, but I have found that the emphasis on a politics of reading, although dialogic in nature, is sometimes a rather brutal way of looking at fiction writing. The trope of a dialogue takes into account the multiplicity of possible reading responses, the subjectivity of the reader, the complexity of reader positioning and the impossibility of predicting reader response, but there exists an ephemeral, sensory relationship with the aesthetics of the writing which it may not be able to embrace so readily. Rather than simply figuring reading as a dialogue, therefore, I propose that it might also be both possible and conceptually useful to borrow a speculative expression from Jean-Luc Nancy and to consider reading 'as touching, as being touched' in both literal and figurative terms. Since it is usually relational and
frequently mutual, touch can thus be a figure both of an approach to the text and of its
effect. Texts can touch us emotionally, psychically, intellectually and even, as in the case
of Cixous's rhythmic and sensual language, bodily. Touch may be welcome or
unwelcome, sexual or non-sexual, heavy or light, casual or meaningful, threatening or
loving, but the sense and the effect of touch, like many instances of reading, remain long
after the moment of its occurrence.

However, this is in no way to suggest that we should dismiss as redundant the
figure of a dialogue on which this study rests, for dialogue, even in its literal sense, does
include the provision of a response to aesthetics – the aesthetics of voice, of tone,
inflection, stress. Thus, my final proposal of a different trope for reading (that of touch) is
not intended to replace the one I originally selected. Rather, it is to suggest that the
relationship between texts and touch (in all its forms) might be another interesting,
productive line of enquiry in itself and might open up new, different directions of
research on the important interactions with our identity that take place in the complex,
creative – and exciting – processes of reading.

1 See Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Corpus', in The Birth to Presence, trans. Brian Holmes and others (Stanford:
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