

The Complexities of Cixous and Ecriture Feminine

Helene Cixous: Live Theory

By Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers

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Review by Kristen Hennessy

How can one write about Cixous' *écriture féminine* when it is so unique in its fluidity and evocation? It is difficult to even choose the proper adjectives to describe the writing of Cixous. (This difficulty is actually a testimony to Cixous' success with *écriture féminine*!) Thus, Blyth and Sellers have undertaken an extraordinarily difficult task in *Helene Cixous: Live theory*. The authors are clearly cognizant of the potential pitfalls of attempting to summarize Cixous, recognizing the difficulties inherent in even translating Cixous because each word means so many things simultaneously (p. 8). They are also aware that, in the Anglo-American world, the works 'Medusa' and 'Sorties' are often seen as representative of all of Cixous, thus alerting them to the dangers of another way of oversimplification by limiting the scope of Cixous (p. 3). They are aware that they are trying to describe the work of someone whose: "poetic nuances are especially difficult to get across" (p. 9). Thus, they do not attempt to summarize Cixous: "This book will not offer an overall survey of Cixous's oeuvre (an impossible task for a book of this length)" (p. 15). Instead, the book aims to reintroduce the Anglo-American audience to the complexities of Cixous and *écriture féminine*.

Stylistically, the authors have chosen a fairly straight-forward language while explaining Cixous. They largely leave the poetics up to Cixous, using ample quotes to capture her poetic style of writing while themselves writing simply. This struck me as quite useful, as it helped to feature Cixous' style. As is true of all such summaries, those who are true Cixous scholars may feel frustrated with the over-simplification of Cixous. Although Blyth and Seller's choices of quotes and excerpts seemed to me to be quite appropriate, I am sure that other authors would have made different choices regarding which aspects of Cixous to highlight and which to skim over or leave out entirely. (Similarly, there are some summaries of Lacanian concepts that are somewhat problematically oversimplified by virtue of their brevity.) Despite this limitation, Blyth and Sellers manage to provide a solid introduction

to Cixous without overly compromising her style. Their decision to turn to Cixous to demonstrate *écriture féminine* as Cixous herself does not see it as something that can be articulated in a succinct way but can only be demonstrated or eluded to (p.19). Perhaps this book functions best as an invitation to turn to Cixous' texts by introducing the reader to the wonderful complexity of her work.

The first chapter is an introduction to Cixous' work and life, bouncing one against the other. The language of *écriture féminine* is introduced, and Cixous' personal path from Algeria to France is explored. The second chapter focuses on feminine writing, with Blyth and Sellers struggling to somehow represent *écriture féminine*, something which is both a theory and not a theory at the same time. "That is to say, *écriture féminine* is not a theory as such (at least not in the sense which theory is commonly understood), but something that is still related to theory" (p. 18/19). This chapter emphasizes what Cixous means by 'feminine' writing, turning away from gender-specific formulations and instead emphasizing particular libidinal economies. Thus, feminine writing is a kind of writing that is 'feminine' in the sense that it avoids appropriation and annihilation. It is feminine in its relationship to language. The third chapter describes Cixous' work with theater and fiction, with her evolving relationship with both used as an exemplification of *écriture féminine*. "One can observe in Cixous' fiction and theatrical writing many of the ideas that underlie *écriture féminine* being put into practice" (p. 35). Blyth and Sellers argue that Cixous' recent work in fiction and the theater is evidence that she has actually found *écriture féminine*. "The rich variety and achievement of Cixous' recent writing might be taken as an indication that the aims of the project of *écriture féminine* have at last been attained" (p. 63). Chapter four marks Cixous' increasing emphasis on poetic writing, exploring what the term "poetic" means to her. The difference between poetic writing and other kinds of philosophical discourse is highlighted. "It is in this refusal to reach a conclusion, in this willingness to admit that she may not complete her 'task' or 'quest', that Cixous' poetic writing can most clearly be differentiated from the concerns of standard philosophical discourse" (p. 68). Poetic writing is not about the destination, but about the illumination that is the journey. Her poetic writing is compared to that of Derrida. The fifth chapter examines Cixous' 'feminine reading,' and also turns to the critical reviews of Cixous. Thus, this chapter shows Cixous reading and Cixous read. Chapter six is 'Cixous Live.' In this final chapter, Cixous presents 'live' in an interview. Here, she revisits many of

the concepts in the book while speaking about the venture of writing itself. It is this final chapter that assures the integrity of Cixous' voice in the text. At the very end of the book is an extensive bibliography of Cixous' work, providing those who wish to read more with the resources to do so.

Helene Cixous: Live theory is a nice introduction to Cixous and *écriture féminine*. Cixous as person is present throughout, from biographical information in the first chapter, to the transcribed interview in the last. Blyth and Sellers accomplish what they set out to do with this text that highlights the voice of Cixous.