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Being Global, Being Whole, Through Myths and Symbols Inscribed in New Utopias

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With her "feminist manifesto" *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975, English trans. 1980), Hélène Cixous was among the first French writers who envisioned new perspectives and built new forms of feminist *utopias*, by reinterpreting the *mythical pattern* of Medusa, a powerful yet extremely frightful figure, traditionally taking revenge especially over men. Medusa, beheaded by Perseus, continues to be dangerous even after she dies, petrifying those who encounter her gaze. Cixous's Medusa is not a perpetrator, but a woman discovering her creative potential, and mostly her power of self-nourishment and self-establishment through the process of writing. In this regard, Cixous's major transformation of the Medusa myth consists in her transfer from the original focus on the mortal gaze to the freeing laughter. This is precisely how Cixous creates her globalizing feminist utopia. She explores some of the fundamental patterns of collective subconscious by which women have been represented in the past. I suggest that she uncovers the deep-rooted archetypes that affect relationships among human beings. In her writing, Cixous reverses these (often) negative patterns and builds new perceptions of life. Although Cixous's intent is to reach out to the majority of women, her new visions of life are obviously contained in the pages of her texts: a beautiful project, maybe, which remains utopian, for reasons that will appear more clearly as I develop my arguments.

For Cixous, a writer so prolific and so dedicated to the universe of *literature*, it is precisely the *words* that are perceived by her as perfect *u-topias* and *u-chronias,* out of space and out of time (Zupancic 1997). In this universe where past, present, and future constantly interact, the use of mythical material appears as the most natural procedure. Cixous has translated a number of Greek authors (performed by Théâtre du Soleil), also in preparation for some of her own dramas, which reconsider the role of women in mythical patterns that have been inherited from the Mediterranean world (see also Mary Noonan, 1999). Cixous is extremely familiar with mythical ways of thinking, such as the conjunction of opposites and webs of analogical connections, which she uses in creating literature that functions as a crucible, a sort of a utopian laboratory, for future types of relationships.

Utopia in contemporary *literature-as-myth genre* sometimes appears as Paradise lost and regained. This is especially true in Cixous, both in her fiction and essays. Some other writers, such as Chantal Chawaf (*Le Corps et le verbe,* 1992), mourn the Paradise lost of the pre-natal, pre-verbal communication, for example, between fetus and mother, a Paradise which is *always to be regained*, for every human being. This Paradise, lost because of our ill-conception of language and because of the way we (mis)understand the fundamental texts of our culture, such as the Bible, can eventually be regained, as Jeanne Hyvrard claims. In her philosophical essay-dictionary *La Pensée corps* (1989), she invites her readers to reverse the situation by the process of feminization of all major concepts which govern our minds. This also means that we need to retranslate and reconsider those texts that have shaped our world view, while also creating new texts (thus, new utopias) which will be in accord with new visions of life.

There are a number of major feminine myths that carry these utopias. A new Persephone descends in the depths of her own and of collective mental structures. When returning to this world, Persephone who is capable of bridging realities, becomes a new, creative Eurydice, a new mythical paradigm that breaks away from the traditional Orphic myth in which Eurydice returns to the underworld and can only be a muse to a male poet. The new Eurydice in feminist texts is herself a poet, a writer, who rejects her connection with Orpheus and eventually replaces him (Zupancic 2001). This new Eurydice is closely linked to a new Aphrodite, whose role is to establish love as a major ruling force, if not in life, at least in literature—in the texts of a large number of contemporary women writers.

Although I can not explore in details these mythical dimensions of fictional characters, or their underlying mythical structures such as they appear in a number of contemporary French texts written by women, I will suggest how their presence in these fictions contribute to the construction of new (feminist) utopias. My essay will concentrate on Hélène Cixous, mainly for two reasons: first, her abundant literary production is marked by the construction of utopias; and second, her work is probably the best known among these creative women, and is more easily accessible to an English speaking audience through its (still not sufficient) translations. The English speaking readers may only discover a few of her writings as these texts progressively become available in translations published in North America.

Cixous's influence on American feminism has been remarkable, although her style continues to be "u-topic" in itself, very obscure, for the majority of her readers. The search for a perfect place, a paradise created in the realm of words, is a constant preoccupation in Cixous's texts. For example, *Le Troisième Corps* (The Third Body,

1970), allows to discover, in its 1999 English translation, nearly thirty years after the original appeared in French, this continuous quest for constructing a language to communicate, a language in which to feel at home, a language that goes beyond all separations or is able to express and contain love. Cixous inscribes these ideas in a text which may appear as a manifesto:

> If you must have a language, let it be one whose quantity cannot be reduced to a single sound, one that moves without displacing, that describes without being written, that knows not the letter and yet is the spirit and has the spirit to be without recourse to visibility, that is made of time and not altered by time, that knows neither childhood nor age, neither the tongues nor the teeth that gnaw at foreign languages, that gives birth to itself, whose soul is everywhere and nowhere, that is free in its coupling. Air cut out of air. (*The Third Body* 147)

The utopian nature of these positions appears through the concepts of self-generation, in an all-encompassing language, which contains the soul of the world. Such utopian dimensions of contemporary French feminist authors are explained by Cecile Lindsay, in her essay on Cixous and Wittig (Lindsay 1986), where the critic explores the links between these writers' interest in bodies as foundations of new creative impulses and their results:

> This tricky relationship with a term—utopia—whose own history and significance are extremely complex, and signals the primary importance accorded to language, writing, and the textual past by contemporary feminism, especially of the French variety. Feminist writers [. . .] place issues such as linguistic structure, syntax, and genre at the foundation of their challenge to literary tradition, cultural practices, and dominant ideological forms. These writers claim that language and writing, as purveyors of the inherited past, must come to provide the central context for the contestatory and utopian impulse of feminist's future. (Lindsay 47)

In this same line of thinking, Cixous creates constant conjunction between language, words, and erotic embracing of opposites that create the language at the core of her writings:

> This divine language would be common to all those beings—perhaps one, or two, maybe three—who have discovered the narrow bed in which opposites embrace, where heaven and hell unite, where extremes compose one tender visage to be absorbed into one another [. . .]. (*The Third Body* 147)

These concepts such as appearing in Cixous's writings are strongly reminiscent of bell hook's *Wounds of Passion:*

> We were excited by words together. Poetry has brought us together. It was a true and perfect union. We could lie together after hours of passionate lovemaking and recite poems. This was my dream to be with someone who understood the words, who loved poetry. For the first time in my life I felt understood. [. . .] Writing was our shared passion and around it and with it we were hoping to make a life—with poetry at the center—a life with no limits. (61)

In a less "utopian," less emphatic, or possibly less mystical language than the one used by Cixous, bell hooks expresses a similar desire to use words, to live in words, to create this particular haven of peace and creativity that makes life into a dream. Both contemporary writers meet in their visions of the all-decisive and determining power of words as the wounds and the healer, the only place that makes them feel that they really are alive. As bell hooks puts it,

> Writing is my passion. Words are the way to know ecstasy. Without them life is barren. The poet insists *Language is a body of suffering and when you take up language you take up the suffering too.* All my life I have been suffering for words. Words have been the source of the pain and the way to heal. (*Wounds...* 208)

Although contemporary French and American feminists express similar ideas, in the case of Hélène Cixous and bell hooks, these writers seem to ignore their similarities and possible connections. Yet, they both ascribe to literature, to words, this particular power of bringing about what has been lost, which creates a deep sense of well-being

beyond the (necessary) suffering (of the loss), of which Cixous speaks herself in many of her texts. For that matter, Cixous, in each and every new "fiction" (a term she uses in French, for her texts in prose, instead of calling them novels), continues to build this particular utopian environment, this uchronia where she brings together times that have been lost, people who died, ideas that seem to be forgotten.

In Cixous's work, nothing is said once and for all: it seems as if the new awareness of life, a new consciousness of this demiurgic power of a *woman writer* to recreate times and spaces, needs to reassert itself, repeating and restating it in text after text. Yet, this necessity to repeat herself does not appear to Cixous as a flaw, as the incapacity of her original statements to leave a deep enough mark that would not require a constant repetition. Nevertheless, among the critics who follow closely Cixous's work, very few seem to feel any doubt about the ability of her words to change the world, as Martine Motard-Noar does:

> [...] Cixous [fait] peut-être trop confiance en cette identité supra-historique qu'est le pouvoir du mot [. . .]. (1992: 293)
> [Cixous may be too confident in this supra-historical identity which is the power of words.]

Yet, Cixous continues to affirm how powerful literature can be in the process of building a new consciousness, especially among women. Still, she seems to be somehow aware of the precariousness of these mental constructions that live only in the pages of a book. Her clear intention is to awaken other people's sensitivity through her words. She suggests that this utopian world of words is a powerful abode, her real home. The construction of the self through writing is an endeavor that involves body, mind, and spirit: it demands Cixous's full attention and commitment. As a result, she is successful

in unveiling of the deep (subconscious) layers of the multiple universes such as they appear to her in the process of writing (in her rather mystical communion with language as a universe in itself).

In as much as literary texts broaden our horizons and help us create new perceptions and establish new connections, these texts, once born, have a life of their own, just as a child does after parting with its mother, a necessity of which Cixous is perfectly aware. In a certain way, though, once she finishes a book, she hasn't exited the World of Literature as such, which continues to call upon her. Her next text picks up certain elements encountered in previous texts, adding to them always new dimensions and making new connections (as Cixous explains in the collection of her lectures at the University of California at Irvine, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing,* 1993). It is as if the World of Literature, in Cixous's perception, is in fact the collective consciousness (or subconsciousness) itself, safekeeping the memories, the ideas, of artists past and present (reminding us of the Akasha, the memory of the world, of which we read in the texts of Indian philosophers). Cixous uses three tools to foster her creativity: her dreams, her awareness of death, and her connection to the roots, which for her is the attachment to the works of major artists of the world. In this way, Cixous seems to keep a door to this perfect no-space no-time universe constantly open (*Three Steps...*). Still, the affiliation needs to be confirmed, reestablished, book after book, embodiment of the words after embodiment (in the sense that literary works are living organisms that have their own ethereal bodies).

This may be where a typical representative of a trend in contemporary French feminist prose differs from an American writer such as bell hooks. In her texts which

affirm her own dedication to literature, bell hooks seems to take poetry, and written words all together, as a given: once discovered, they are not to be lost. In one of her latest essays, *All About Love* (2000), bell hooks, without a hint of a doubt, and still by using words, appears herself as a new Aphrodite calling forth the redemptive power of love:

> Love heals. When we are wounded in the place where we would know love, it is difficult to imagine that love really has the power to change everything. No matter what has happened in our past, when we open our hearts to love we can live as if born again [. . .]. (209)

Quite clearly, bell hooks is herself in the process of creating a new utopia of a social model which is based on this unconditional openheartedness, where people can grow spiritually together in a world of justice and understanding. Instead of a literary model, where she would explore the dimensions of "unconditional love," bell hooks seems much more attracted to a form of an easy-to-read *genre*, much like the self-help books which abound on the bookshelves in America, which may enable her to communicate more directly with her readers and guarantee that her thoughts be appreciated—and understood.

In her own fiction, Hélène Cixous never stopped to signify that the only coherent force holding together her utopia is love, which allows for the communication between living and death. This approach could in its turn be compared to Christine Downing's psychoanalytical (Jungian) explorations of the inner realms (*The Goddess,* 1999). Yet, I doubt that Cixous's readers approach her books with the intent to learn more about how to love better in every day experiences of their lives (as would bell hook's or Christine Downing's readers). The *hermetic* nature of Cixous's writings may be a result of a deliberate attempt to remain inside the domain of literature, inside of a certain literary

tradition, where difficulty, and complexity of thoughts, bears testimony to a writer's literary skills and gifts. To some extent, this hermetism keeps the veil on this writing which continues to appear as an "oracle," leaving a variety of interpretations at the mercy of the more or less experienced readers.

In bell hook's creation of this new utopia of love, women are given a powerful role to play, in educating men not only how to love but how to live properly:

> [Women] are, in fact, the real sleeping beauties. We might be living in a world that would be even more alienated and violent if caring women did not do the work of teaching men who have lost touch with themselves how to live again. (*All About Love* 160)

One would suggest that this statement is very close to what Cixous's entire work continues to underscore, but in the context of French way of thinking, these ideas will not come across in such a direct way. Still, when Cixous rejoices in inviting other women to write, claim and restore their power by entering into this community of words (*La Venue à l'écriture,* 1977), she also perceives women as birth-givers to a new humanity through literature.

This is where we may return to the initial mention of Cixous's *The Laugh of Medusa*. The utopian nature of this literary manifesto becomes clearer when we have a closer look at some of Cixous's ideas, especially from an archetypal perspective.

Much has been said among American feminist critics about Cixous's determined affirmation of feminine creative powers, in a world still run by men, but where a Medusa figure does not need to be beheaded any longer. As Cynthia Running-Johnson explains:

> In presenting the ''New Woman" [a clearly utopian concept, which the critic does not discuss in her text] and the writing through which she will realize herself, Cixous moves away from the negative elements of the Medusa myth. Her ideas

> connect rather with the potentially positive aspects of the Medusa figure itself. The writhing snakes on the Medusa's head, for example, become signs of a rebellious and affirming stance. The frightening and finally punished Medusa of the ancient legend is metamorphosed into a freed and freeing woman. (485)

In my own interpretation of the freeing dimension of the new Medusa, I focus on the significance of *laughter* and its connection to the mythical tradition. In his exploration of a Russian folktale *Nesmejana* (The Princess who wouldn't laugh), Vladimir Propp places laughter at the core of creative processes in ancient myths and religions. In a chapter titled "Laughter As the Giver of Life," Propp suggests that, "If all laughter ceases and is forbidden upon entrance into the kingdom of death, then entrance into life is accompanied by laughter" (131). Furthermore, "In all cases laughter emerges as a magic means for creating life" (135): the "divinity creates the world laughing and the laughter of a divinity creates the world. On entering the world, the goddess of birth laughs, a mother or pregnant woman laughs, a youth symbolically returning to the world laughs" (134). Laughter precedes pregnancy, says Propp, and he gives the Biblical example of Sarah's laughter at conceiving of Isaac (133). Instead of being perceived as sarcastic, it should be placed in the continuity of magical procedures, continues Propp. This in turn would affect her son: quoting Reinach (1912: 122), "the name Isaac means 'laughing'. The Jews knew well that Yishak means 'he who laughs'" (Propp 133).

With these data in mind, Cixous's Medusa acquires new dimensions, especially because of a later development in *Déluge* (1992), where Cixous makes her narrator descend into the underworld and bring her back as a laughing Isaac (Zupančič 1995). This cross-gender stimulation of creative powers of laughter creates a hermaphroditic utopian situation where a woman writer gives birth to herself in a narcissistic, non-

patriarchal stance of a particular self-sufficiency. In this particular creation of herself, a woman writer, such as also described by Annie Leclerc, in *Parole de femme* (Zupančič 1999 [2000]), participates in a very utopian "re-creation of the world," where laughter is a major element of self-love. This is exactly what exemplifies the deep connection between Cixous's vision of a new writer and a number of mythical figures. A Persephone figure (a *Thea,* ''the silent goddess of death," Downing 44) doubles with a Promethea, another cross-gender creation of Cixous', combining Prometheus and a feminine incarnation of this mythical principle, in *Le Livre de Promethea* (1983). Betsy Wing, in her introduction to (her) translation of this work, alludes to Cixous's deep concern with love as a leading force in each and every society:

> *The Book of Promethea* explores the risk that must be taken to be in love, that is, to know at every moment not just that one loves, but also that one is beloved. Because this is, for Hélène Cixous, a life-or-death situation, all of life intensity is focused into these moments. (v)

It is especially this "fiction," *The Book of Promethea,* that is considered by Sarah Cornell to be Cixous's major exploration of "Paradise Refound" (Cornell 1988). Placing the possibility of reconnecting with the lost, with the Edenic state of mind and heart, in the context of love, Cixous is thus appealing to Aphrodite, the goddess of love (see Christine Downing and also Ginette Paris). This is where the utopian nature of her fiction is in fact confirmed. Literature as a draft for a new social project that will prove possible as the time passes, or will turn into one more idealistic, out-of-space and out-of-time reflection, has nevertheless already succeeded in shattering some of the core beliefs that our times have inherited from the past. This is exactly where Medusa, such as envisioned by Cixous, may regain some of the initial dimensions that have been completely

forgotten, or rather forced into oblivion, throughout millennia. Medusa seems to be a very old goddess figure (from as far back as the 6th millienium B.C.), representing both death and regeneration, who can ultimately destroy and create (Gimbutas/Robbins Dexter xvii, xix, 26, 217). Reinforced by the mostly creative powers of Aphrodite, Medusa's myth can thus serve as a rich and empowering archetype in contemporary feminist writing.

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