

## INTRODUCTION

During the eighteen years that followed the publication of her first novel, Violette Leduc's work drew critical esteem from a small group of intellectuals and fellow writers, but was otherwise largely ignored. During the sixties and early seventies, in the wake of the furore that accompanied the appearance of *La Bâtarde*, she achieved a degree of popular success which barely fell short of notoriety, and the originality of her writing was finally widely acknowledged by reviewers and critics. Sadly, however, interest in Leduc's texts waned once more after her death in 1972, and it is only recently that she has re-emerged from literary exile, thanks primarily to work that has been done on her writing in the United States. This monograph seeks to extend and refine a body of critical analysis by scholars who have brought to Leduc's *œuvre* the attention and recognition it deserves. A brief account of Leduc's life and, more importantly, of the critical responses her texts have elicited will guide the reader towards an understanding of the nature and scope of my project.

### A LIFE IN WRITING

Violette Leduc was born in Arras on 7 April 1907. She was the illegitimate daughter of Berthe Leduc and André Debaralle, the son of a rich Protestant family in Valenciennes, in whose home Berthe had been a servant. Never legitimized by her father's family, Violette was brought up by her mother and her beloved maternal grandmother, Fidéline. Her impoverished, unhappy childhood, marred by the stigma of illegitimacy and by her mother's acts of unkindness, provided material for her first novel *L'Asphyxie* (1946), and is described in detail in *La Bâtarde* (1964), the first of what were to be three autobiographical *récits*. In 1913, Violette, Berthe, and Fidéline returned to Valenciennes. Fidéline's death in 1916 led to a strengthening of the already powerful bond that existed between Leduc and her mother. In the years that followed, during which Violette and Berthe lived together in relative isolation, Leduc received from her mother the warnings against men and pregnancy which reflected Berthe's experience of single motherhood, but which left her daughter with a fear and mistrust of the male sex she never entirely lost ('Nous prenions notre petit déjeuner, ma mère m'entretenait des laideurs de la vie. Elle m'offrait chaque matin un terrible cadeau: celui de la méfiance et de la

suspicion. Tous les hommes étaient des salauds, tous les hommes étaient des sans-cœur' (*La Bâtarde*, p. 39)).

In 1919, Leduc became a *pensionnaire* at the *collège de Valenciennes*. The following year Berthe married Ernest Dehous. Violette experienced her mother's marriage as a betrayal, and never came to terms with her stepfather's presence. She remained a boarder in Valenciennes, despite the proximity of her mother's new home to the *collège*, until Dehous moved his business and family to Paris, at which point she entered the *collège de Douai*. During the academic year 1924–25, she began her first lesbian relationship with a classmate, Isabelle, whose real identity has remained a mystery. The liaison ended when Isabelle left the school and the lovers lost contact. The following year, Leduc became involved with a *surveillante* at the *collège*, whom she calls Hermine in *La Bâtarde* and whose name, in reality, was Denise Hertgès.<sup>1</sup> When the affair was discovered, Denise lost her job and Leduc was subsequently expelled. Having joined her family in Paris, Violette continued to see Denise, now working as an *institutrice* in the provinces. She studied at the *lycée Racine*, which she attended between 1926 and 1927, and met Jacques Mercier, the man she would eventually marry and whom she names Gabriel in her autobiographies.

In 1927, Leduc passed the written part of her *baccalauréat* but failed the oral. Her passion for reading helped her to find employment with the publishing house Plon where, in a sense, her career as a writer began, since her work involved the composition of 'news-items' (*échos*) into which she had to introduce references to authors published by Plon. Although still involved with Denise Hertgès, she continued, for a time, to see Jacques Mercier. Leduc recounts the curious, triangular situation which resulted in *La Bâtarde*, and it also inspired parts of her third novel, *Ravages* (1955). Forced by ill-health to leave Plon in 1931, Leduc was supported by Hertgès until the end of their relationship in 1934.

After her break with Hertgès, Leduc found work as a telephonist and receptionist with the film producer Denise Batcheff. During this second period of employment, she made the acquaintance of the homosexual writer Maurice Sachs, who was the first to recognize and nurture Leduc's literary talent. In 1939, she also met Jacques Mercier again, and subsequently married him, although the marriage was never a happy one. When war was declared, she lost her job. Encouraged by Sachs, with whom she was deeply infatuated, she took up magazine journalism and made a success of it. However, her troubled relationship with Mercier deteriorated, and a suicide attempt and an abortion (she was by now pregnant by Mercier) followed.

In 1942, Violette accompanied Sachs to Normandy and began, once again at his instigation, to write the text which would eventually be published as *L'Asphyxie*. After Sachs went to Germany as a *travailleur volontaire*, she

became a black marketeer, continuing her highly profitable activities until the Liberation. Returning to Paris after the war, she met Simone de Beauvoir. This decisive encounter effectively launched Leduc's literary career. She was already an ardent admirer of Beauvoir's; in 1945 the two women were introduced, and Beauvoir read Leduc's manuscript and liked it.<sup>2</sup> She encouraged Leduc to rewrite parts of the novel, arranged for extracts to appear in the recently founded review *Les Temps Modernes* and ensured that Camus published *L'Asphyxie* in Gallimard's *Espoir* series. In Leduc's eyes, Beauvoir came to assume almost superhuman status.<sup>3</sup> She offered support, stimulation and constructive criticism until Leduc's death, even though the passionate devotion she inspired in her protégée remained unreciprocated. Leduc's second novel, *L'Affamée*, published in 1948, constitutes a fictionalized, surreal and often violent account of her feelings for her muse and mentor, whom she addresses as 'Madame'.

In 1947, Leduc was divorced from Mercier and received, apparently from Gallimard but in reality from Beauvoir, a monthly allowance which enabled her to go on writing. Genet introduced her to Jacques Guérin, a wealthy homosexual industrialist who became her patron. Like Sachs and Beauvoir, he was the object of Leduc's unrequited passion; in his case, however, her attachment turned into an obsession which played a key part in her later breakdown. Leduc's mental equilibrium was further disturbed in 1955, when Gallimard refused to publish her third novel, *Ravages*, until its first section, which chronicled the adolescent, lesbian relationship of two *collégiennes*, was removed. The novel appeared without this and other, shorter parts, and consequently only recounts the adult sexual relationships of its heroine, Thérèse. In order to console Leduc, Guérin financed a visit to Ibiza, during which she rewrote the rejected pages on delicate Chinese paper, creating a 'brouillon artificiel' which Guérin had published, as a gift, in an *édition de luxe*.

Gallimard's act of censorship exacerbated Leduc's recurrent delusions of persecution. In the latter part of 1956, she spent six months in a psychiatric clinic in Versailles, undergoing a sleep cure. During her period of hospitalization, she wrote *La Vieille fille et le mort*, the tale of an initially satisfying but ultimately hopeless passion a lonely old woman conceives for a corpse she finds one evening in her *café-épicerie*. In common with many of Leduc's texts, the novella emphasizes the fundamental solitude of the human individual and the transitory nature of love. *La Vieille fille et le mort* was published in 1958, together with *Les Boutons dorés*, another short narrative which, like *L'Asphyxie*, deals with the theme of childhood unhappiness. In the same year, Leduc discovered Faucon, the remote village in Provence to which she eventually retired, and met a stonemason, René Galet. Their relationship, which seems to have been Leduc's most successful heterosexual liaison, is

described in her third autobiographical *récit*, *La Chasse à l'amour* (1973). In 1960, Gallimard published *Trésors à prendre*, the account of a journey through southern France that Leduc made at Beauvoir's suggestion. This journey represented a kind of pilgrimage, designed to affirm Leduc's almost mystical adoration of Beauvoir. As Isabelle de Courtivron argues, *Trésors à prendre* 'is a homage to the same unattainable Madame of *L'Affamée*, a hymn to her spirit',<sup>4</sup> and displays the poetic, lyrical quality which characterizes much of Leduc's most compelling writing.

Although Leduc had been a published author since 1946, commercial success had eluded her. Between 1960 and 1964, however, she wrote *La Bâtarde*, the text which, temporarily at least, brought her the recognition Beauvoir knew she deserved. Extracts from the *récit* appeared in *Les Temps modernes* in 1961 and 1963, and it was finally published in 1964, accompanied by a laudatory preface by Beauvoir. The work, which impressed readers with its startlingly honest exploration of human — and more particularly sexual — concerns, sold well, was considered for the Goncourt and Fémina literary prizes, and brought Leduc into the public eye for the first time. In the years that followed, she was able to buy the house she had rented in Faucon and to embrace an extravagant, fashionable lifestyle, which compensated in part for the penury and solitude she had previously endured. Another novella, *La Femme au petit renard*, which tells the story of a destitute woman's joyous obsession with a fox fur she finds in a dustbin, was well received by the critics in 1965.

In 1966, Gallimard brought out Leduc's modified version of the section of *Ravages* they had excised eleven years before, under the title *Thérèse et Isabelle*. This text differs from both Guérin's *édition de luxe*, twenty-five copies of which were published in 1955, and from the account Leduc gives in *La Bâtarde* of her relationship with the mysterious Isabelle, although all three versions inevitably display certain similarities.<sup>5</sup> In the same year, Leduc underwent radiotherapy for a tumour in her left breast; the treatment was unsuccessful, and the breast was eventually removed.

Leduc left Paris and settled permanently in Faucon in 1969. In 1970, *La Folie en tête*, her second autobiographical *récit*, appeared. The text covers the years following the end of the war and recounts some of the most significant and traumatic events of Leduc's life: her encounter with Beauvoir, the publication of her first novel, the obsession with Guérin which aggravated her mental collapse, and the rigorous creative process through which the opening section of *Ravages*, subsequently cut by Gallimard, came into being. The following year *Le Taxi*, a short erotic dialogue between an incestuous brother and sister, was published. In 1972, after a period in hospital in Avignon, Leduc succumbed to cancer and died in Faucon, on 28 May. The last of her autobiographies, *La Chasse à l'amour*, in which she describes her affair with René and the writing of *La Bâtarde*, was edited by Beauvoir and was published posthumously by Gallimard in 1973.

Despite the literary reputation she had acquired in the last decade of her life, Leduc's writing soon lapsed into obscurity.

#### LEDUC AND THE CRITICS

Leduc's life and personality were far from unexceptional, and furnished the stuff of much of her *œuvre*. Not unexpectedly, the majority of critics who have taken her work seriously have chosen to analyse the nature of her autobiographical project, and to examine the textual strategies she employs in order to construct her self in writing. The theoretical approaches critics adopt in their explorations of Leduc's autobiographical corpus vary widely. An early, Existentialist analysis of Leduc's autobiographical writing is contained in Beauvoir's preface to *La Bâtarde*. She presents the heroine of *La Bâtarde* as an individual dominated by guilt and shame, annihilatory sentiments reinforced by the accusing gaze of the Other, personified for Violette by her mother. According to Beauvoir, other people, whether the mother or Leduc's various lovers, are a source of torment; if present and accessible they ravage her, while their absence constitutes rejection. Salvation lies in acts of self-affirmation which free Violette from their domination: her black-marketeering and, more importantly, her literary endeavours. Writing permits moreover 'l'impossible synthèse de l'absence et de la présence' which escaped Leduc in her personal relationships but which her text allows her to enjoy in her relation with her reader.<sup>6</sup> Beauvoir's analysis led the authors of several works dealing with modern French literature to suggest that Leduc's writing might have Existentialist implications. The most compelling of these studies is contained in Michael Sheringham's recent exploration of French autobiographical writing, *Devices and Desires*.<sup>7</sup> Sheringham offers, *inter alia*, a remarkable analysis of the dynamic Leduc establishes with her reader, and of the transformation this undergoes as she moves towards liberation.

An article published in 1982 by Jean Snitzer Schoenfeld adopts a psychoanalytic approach to Leduc's first autobiographical  *récit*.<sup>8</sup> Schoenfeld's point of departure is the Lejeunian notion that 'l'autobiographie [ . . . ] doit avant tout essayer de manifester l'unité profonde de la vie'.<sup>9</sup> He suggests that in Leduc's case, guilt and anguish at her illegitimacy which, transposed into a literary leitmotif, were meant to act as structuring forces providing continuity and cohesion, in fact function as destabilizing agents that ensure her quest for unity fails. He goes on to discuss the various strategies the narrator-heroine of *La Bâtarde* adopts within the text in order to mend the psychic divisions of which she is a victim, and concludes that while writing does not ultimately serve as a perfect unifying medium, it does permit Leduc to come to terms with her fragmented psyche — a more problematic but also more rewarding achievement than the creation of a superficial, aesthetic unity.

Martha Noel Evans's 'La Mythologie de l'écriture dans *La Bâtarde* de Violette Leduc' presents Leduc's autobiographical writing in terms of a search for a stable identity and origin, achieved via the textual rebirth of her own self.<sup>10</sup> Evans suggests that in *La Bâtarde* Leduc pursues an inauthentic identity by associating herself with each of the poles between which she oscillates: the legitimate world of her father, which is also that of writing, and the visceral, feminine sphere, of which her bloody, illegitimate birth is a symptom. Leduc's quest for identity takes the form of a quest for paternal and maternal models of authorship, the first involving an attempt to use the literary space to usurp the procreative power of the father, and the second a transformation of the text into a site of idyllic affection of the kind Leduc received from her grandmother. However, neither model of selfhood/writing proves valid or acceptable, and so Leduc is eventually forced to confront difference, which functions as the basis both of identity and of the language she creates in her *récit*. *La Bâtarde*, for Evans, ultimately involves a movement toward the evolution of a discourse in which femininity and masculinity play together, engendering 'un brillant tissu de mots'.<sup>11</sup> Evans's deconstructive reading gives a less than complete account of the text, but her ideas are interesting and are developed in several later essays.<sup>12</sup>

The degree of feminist analysis in Beauvoir's preface to *La Bâtarde* is limited. This should not surprise us, given that she wrote it at a time when, in spite of the success of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, feminist thought was not accorded the importance that it is today. However, other critics — including Elaine Marks,<sup>13</sup> Margaret Crosland,<sup>14</sup> and Germaine Brée<sup>15</sup> — have read Leduc's texts from a gynocritical/feminist perspective, and Brée includes Leduc in a list of women writers who have engendered 'l'explosion d'une littérature féministe qui cherche sa voie propre'.<sup>16</sup> Amongst those analyses of Leduc's writing that are gender-related, particular studies stand out. In a stimulating article on *L'Affamée*, Michèle Respaut argues that the novel's account of the relationship between its narrator and 'Madame' undermines the dualistic angel/monster stereotype so frequently discernible in representations of femininity, and generates a subversive discourse from which new visions of the feminine might emerge.<sup>17</sup> Leduc's explorations of the feminine condition and of feminine intersubjectivity have elicited a good deal of interest amongst feminist scholars. Marilyn Yalom and Colette Hall, for example, both include Leduc in discussions of French women authors who focus on the complex, troubled mother/daughter bond.<sup>18</sup> These critics indicate that Leduc's autobiographical writing provides insights of universal as well as personal significance into female kinship and interaction. Leduc's accounts of feminine homoeroticism in *Ravages*, *La Bâtarde* and *Thérèse et Isabelle* have led some critics to explore her treatment of lesbian bonding.<sup>19</sup> Jane Rule includes a chapter on Leduc in *Lesbian Images*,<sup>20</sup> and Leduc's handling of the lesbian theme is examined in

detail in Elaine Marks's impressive essay 'Lesbian Intertextuality'.<sup>21</sup> Marks seeks to establish Leduc's place in the history of writing by and about lesbians, and to evaluate her contribution to it. She suggests that, like Colette, Leduc played a part in the revolutionary creation of 'a language capable of speaking the unspoken in Western literature — female sexuality with woman as namer'.<sup>22</sup> Marks views Leduc as a forerunner of Monique Wittig, hinting that the combination of sexual/textual rhythm in *Thérèse et Isabelle* represents an attempt to transpose body into text which prefigures the hymn to the lesbian body constituted by Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*. Like Respaut, Marks indicates that Leduc helps forge a new discourse in which femininity may be represented with greater authenticity than was previously possible.

The critic who has undoubtedly done the most to ensure that Violette Leduc's work is not forgotten is Isabelle de Courtivron. Like the feminist scholars mentioned above, de Courtivron is attuned to the need to bring an awareness of issues of gender and sexuality to bear on readings of the Leducian corpus. In her doctoral thesis and in a later article published in *L'Esprit Créateur* in 1979, she analyses Leduc's exploration, in *L'Affamée* in particular, of the depths of the self and the experience of insanity, and examines her transposition of this inner voyage into an artistic form which reflects the chaos she confronted.<sup>23</sup> De Courtivron suggests that Leduc is one of the few women writers who have dared, like Rimbaud and Baudelaire, to penetrate the abysses of the self and in so doing has moved away from 'acceptable' models of feminine literary discourse — hence the unsettling nature of her work. In a further essay in *Yale French Studies*, which deals with *L'Affamée* and *Trésors à prendre*, she examines the literary account Leduc gives of the quasi-religious devotion she felt for Beauvoir, and speculates upon the role Leduc may have played in Beauvoir's life.<sup>24</sup> Finally, de Courtivron's monograph *Violette Leduc*, which appeared in 1985, provides a detailed, succinct introduction to Leduc's *œuvre*.<sup>25</sup> It includes a discussion of the differences between the work of male and female autobiographers and an analysis of aspects of Leduc's writing which, taken as evidence of her 'female imagination', place her within a specifically female literary tradition. The only other full-length study devoted to Leduc's work is *Œdipe Masqué*, by Pièr Girard.<sup>26</sup> In an absorbing if clinical psychoanalytic account of the connections between infantile and adult neuroses, Girard analyses Leduc's exposition in *L'Affamée* of her passion for Beauvoir and relates this to the primordial relationship between Leduc and her mother Berthe, as it is described in *La Bâtarde*.

## WRITING THE FEMININE

As my (by no means exhaustive) overview of existing interpretations of Leduc's work suggests, most critics have concentrated on its autobiographical

aspect, dwelling particularly on *La Bâtarde*. One consequence of this is that three of her texts, *L'Asphyxie*, *Ravages* and *Thérèse et Isabelle*, which deal with similar areas of female experience to those chronicled in *La Bâtarde* and may therefore be regarded in some measure as the *récit's* fictional companion pieces, have either been ignored or have been treated as mere extensions of Leduc's autobiographical corpus. This view is widespread amongst Leducian critics, one of whom comments that:

Entre les romans et les récits on ne trouve aucune différence essentielle, chaque roman n'étant que la mise en œuvre de tels ou tels épisodes de la vie de l'auteur, à peine déguisés, et qui seront plus ou moins repris dans le premier récit franchement autobiographique. [...] Ce qui veut dire que les premiers livres sont l'approximation ou les fragments d'un livre total, les premières tentatives héroïques d'une percée au grand jour.<sup>27</sup>

If *L'Asphyxie*, *Ravages* and *Thérèse et Isabelle* are treated simply as elements of a homogeneous, albeit segmented, autobiographical whole, critical responses to them will inevitably be coloured by the account Leduc gives of herself and her experiences in *La Bâtarde*. Viewing these texts as mere 'fragments d'un livre total' can give rise to readings which obscure or disregard their individual qualities. My intention here is to approach these novels from a different angle. I aim to provide a close textual analysis of *L'Asphyxie*, *Ravages* and *Thérèse et Isabelle* which constitutes 'un travail qui s'installe dans l'œuvre', i.e. a reading that focuses exclusively upon the material contained within the texts in question, rather than one that is circumscribed by information and insights furnished by *La Bâtarde*.<sup>28</sup>

My decision to limit my exploration of Leduc's writing to a study of these particular novels, and to approach them as works of fiction rather than as autobiographical fragments which may be assimilated into *La Bâtarde*, can be justified in a number of ways. Firstly, like other Leducian texts, they have (undeservedly) received less critical attention than the autobiographical *récits*. Secondly, although clearly inspired at least in part by the experiences Leduc recounts in *La Bâtarde*, each has a unique flavour, and cannot therefore simply be dismissed as a segment of a divided but uniform autobiographical portrait. Furthermore, with regard to *L'Asphyxie* and *Ravages*, Leduc herself explicitly stated that she did not seek to create mere 'mirror-texts', in which sections of *La Bâtarde* are reproduced or magnified. As she analyses the history and behaviour of her mother Berthe in *La Bâtarde*, Leduc observes:

Ma mère s'était surpassée en courage, en énergie, en magnanimité quand elle avait quitté la maison d'André. Elle ne pardonnait pas aux autres hommes ce qu'elle avait fait pour un seul. J'ai parlé de cela autrement dans *Ravages*, dans *L'Asphyxie*. J'ai mêlé la vérité au roman. (p. 40)

Similarly, when she apostrophizes her ex-husband 'Gabriel' in the *récit*, she makes a clear distinction between the text she (or, more accurately, the

narrating self she has created) is weaving and *Ravages*, in which the central male character, Marc, displays many of 'Gabriel's traits: 'Archange, j'ai été injuste avec toi dans *Ravages*. C'est un roman, c'est notre roman, c'est romancé' (p. 125).

Both of these statements suggest that the *romans* to which they refer are autonomous works, which stand apart from Leduc's more directly autobiographical texts. It is true that elsewhere in *La Bâtarde* Leduc draws the attention of her readers to *Ravages* in order to avoid a lengthy re-narration of events which are depicted in that novel and which she wishes to describe once more. This simply suggests that *Ravages* incorporates autobiographical material, but does not mean that the novel is just an account of Leduc's life which parallels that contained in *La Bâtarde*. The above comments indicate that we need not and should not blithely assume that Leduc's early novels represent nothing more than preparatory sketches for her first autobiographical *récit*.

A further aspect of the three texts under scrutiny here justifies my decision not to read them through *La Bâtarde*. The latter text charts the development of Violette, a solitary female subject, whose destiny seems pre-determined by her illegitimacy, and whose experience of life is characterized by marginalization and alienation. A variety of encounters and relationships, invariably both painful and formative, enable the narrator/protagonist of the work to reach a point from which she is able to write retrospectively about her life and to gain access to the *salut* represented, if Beauvoir and other analysts of Leduc's writing are to be believed, by literary creation. In *L'Asphyxie*, *Ravages* and *Thérèse et Isabelle*, however, the focus seems different. Each novel may be read as an exploration of the complex (familial or sexual) ties which exist between female subjects. In these fictional works, in other words, Leduc appears more concerned with the dynamics of feminine interaction, whereas in *La Bâtarde* the emphasis is upon the evolution of a single female subject and, more particularly, on her artistic evolution. *L'Asphyxie*, *Ravages* and *Thérèse et Isabelle* may then, for all the foregoing reasons, be approached as a cohesive body of texts which merit separate analysis.

Existing studies of Leduc's work indicate that her account of feminine interaction occupies a central place within her *œuvre*. I seek to bring fresh insights to bear upon Leduc's representation of the mother/daughter and lesbian bonds and to interrogate certain assumptions made by critics about her vision of these relationships. Consequently, chapters 1–3 of my discussion will be concerned with Leduc's treatment of female bonding in the three novels I have chosen to focus on. Chapters 1 and 2 examine her depiction of the mother/daughter tie in *L'Asphyxie* and *Ravages* and chapter 3 offers an analysis of her portrayal, in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, of lesbian love.

In *L'Asphyxie* and *Ravages*, Leduc does more than denounce maternal inadequacy of the kind she undoubtedly encountered in her relationship with

Berthe. It has been claimed that *L'Asphyxie* simply offers an emotional, highly subjective critique of 'a harsh, egocentric woman, who inspires nevertheless fascination in her daughter', and represents a cry of rage, uttered by a daughter/writer unable to forget the pain of the past, at the cruel inflexibility of her mother.<sup>29</sup> This assessment is unjustifiably limited. *L'Asphyxie* in fact contains a systematic denunciation of a sexually unequal sociocultural order which emerges as a key source of the violence to which the daughter-heroine of the novel is subjected by her mother. Furthermore, *L'Asphyxie* may be interpreted as a symbolic account of the unconscious ambivalence felt by its heroine toward a maternal figure whose reality remains hidden. The Kleinian reading of the novel I offer in the concluding section of Chapter 1 locates this ambivalence as the stimulus for the fantastic, oppositional configuration of 'good' and 'bad' mothers contained in *L'Asphyxie*.

Leduc's third novel, *Ravages*, has been read as the tale of the damaging effect upon a daughter's psychosexual and social development of a restrictive maternal embargo against heterosexuality and maternity.<sup>30</sup> While Leduc certainly confronts the problems inherent in the mother/daughter dynamic in *Ravages*, she also creates a powerful critique of a (Freudian) model of feminine evolution, according to which the female subject must shatter her primordial attachment to her mother and take up her place in a phallogentric sexual economy, in which she is exiled and made subordinate to the male. Moreover, *Ravages* reveals Leduc to have been instinctively attuned to the need — subsequently foregrounded in the theoretical writings of Luce Irigaray — to remove the mother/daughter bond from the limbo of non-representation to which it has been consigned in our androcentric culture, and to articulate the absence of/need for a 'maternal genealogy'.<sup>31</sup>

Chapter 3 of my study deals with Leduc's account of feminine homoeroticism in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, and illuminates the visionary, utopian character of her lesbian discourse in this short text. In *Thérèse et Isabelle*, the lesbian bond between Leduc's adolescent heroines emerges as a seemingly perfect — if ultimately vulnerable — erotic union. My argument in this chapter is that Leduc's efforts to represent a very positive lesbian dynamic, which neither mimics a heterosexual, potentially unequal relationship nor simply functions as an extension of the mother/daughter bond, are indicative of a desire on her part to envision a new and different order of feminine sexuality and inter-subjectivity.

First and foremost, my reading of feminine interaction in *L'Asphyxie*, *Ravages* and *Thérèse et Isabelle* has been influenced both by (French) feminist theory and by psychoanalysis, since an initial examination of existing interpretations of Leduc's texts suggested that approaches which engaged with feminist and/or psychoanalytic discourse proved to be the most illuminating. It has been pointed out that Leduc's own ambivalent attitude towards feminism — and,

more specifically, her apparent belief that literary activity affords women access to a (privileged) virility they otherwise lack — means that her writing cannot justifiably be treated as a 'revanche féministe'.<sup>32</sup> Critics must, however, take care to avoid oversimplification. For one thing, the relatively dormant state of feminism in France at the time when Leduc's *œuvre* came into being means that it stood little chance of representing a 'revanche féministe' of the kind which younger, more politicized women writers have created in recent years, and which is easily identified by today's reader — but this does not mean that Leduc's texts cannot be interpreted as feminist productions. Furthermore, we need not take Leduc's equation of virility and (women's) writing as proof positive that her work lacks a feminist dimension. This is because those parts of her *œuvre* which imply a conviction on her part that women accede to 'masculinity' via literature arguably constitute the expression of a feminist consciousness which lacked the vocabulary or intellectual sophistication to articulate itself in a more plausible form. In any case, even if we find Leduc herself politically 'dubious', we should not forget that 'ce que palpent nos antennes de lecteur, ce sont les intentions de l'œuvre plutôt que les intentions de l'auteur',<sup>33</sup> and that it is both possible and productive to make a coherent feminist reading of Leduc's writings. It seems clear, therefore, that this kind of interpretation of her texts is valid and valuable, whatever her own position *vis-à-vis* feminism may have been.

Critics who apply psychoanalytic theory to a literary text may do so in order to discover something about its author, its characters or the culture which has engendered it, or may choose instead, if they adopt a less traditional approach, to concentrate on the structural workings of the text, treating its language as the mirror of a non-personal psyche which is structured in an identical way to language.<sup>34</sup> For those scholars who stress the personal, autobiographical character of Leduc's writing, it is Leduc herself who becomes the analysand of the critical reader, whose task it is to scan her works for evidence of her unconscious desires and obsessions. Rather than treating Leduc's texts as documents attesting to the most secret workings of their author's psyche, this study, in so far as it exploits insights provided by psychoanalysis, will seek to interpret the unconscious conflicts and impulses her writing stages, primarily through an examination of the actions and motives of the characters she creates. The fact that the works which constitute my corpus are narrated in the first person will evidently necessitate some discussion of the relationship between the characters whose psychical complexities are revealed in *L'Asphyxie*, *Ravages* and *Thérèse et Isabelle* and the narrators whose voices reveal them. However, the extent of Leduc's own personal identification/involvement with the protagonists and narrators she creates is not at issue here.

The fourth and final chapter of my study offers an analysis, informed once again by feminist thought but also by a more traditional, formalist perspective,

of the language Leduc employs in *Thérèse et Isabelle*. My decision to restrict discussion to an investigation of *Thérèse et Isabelle* reflects the fact that in *La Folie en tête* Leduc implies that it was her efforts to write the first version of this work which led her to confront the limitations inherent in language. This chapter will include an account of some of Leduc's own observations concerning the (woman) writer's craft. This is intended to help establish whether (and in spite of claims critics have made regarding her belief in the 'virilizing' function of literary activity) Leduc pursued, and achieved, the creation of a language of feminine bonding which was itself somehow 'feminine gendered', or whether the figurative, highly poetic discourse contained in *Thérèse et Isabelle* was intended to serve a different purpose. Although her texts predated the radical feminist analyses of language which emerged in France in the 1970s, the possible relevance of these theoretical discourses to Leduc's *œuvre* will be examined, and the extent to which *Thérèse et Isabelle* constitutes an example of *écriture féminine* will be assessed. The limitations of an exclusively feminist critical approach to Leduc's writing will emerge from this concluding section of my study.

#### NOTES

1. This information was given to me by Carlo Jansiti, Leduc's biographer, in a letter dated 3 November 1987.
2. 'Au cours de l'automne, je rencontrai, dans la queue d'un cinéma des Champs-Élysées, en compagnie d'une relation commune, une grande femme blonde, élégante, au visage brutalement laid mais éclatant de vie: Violette Leduc. Quelques jours plus tard, au Flore, elle me remit un manuscrit. "Des confidences de femme du monde", pensais-je. J'ouvris le cahier: "Ma mère ne m'a jamais donné la main." Je lus d'un trait la moitié du récit; il tournait court, soudain, la fin n'était qu'un remplissage. Je le dis à Violette Leduc: elle supprima les derniers chapitres et en écrivit d'autres qui valaient les premiers; non seulement elle avait le don, mais elle savait travailler.' Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 30.
3. Leduc's idolization of Beauvoir is indicated by the terms in which she describes the feelings she experienced on making her acquaintance: 'C'était plus attachant, c'était plus bouleversant qu'une amitié, c'était plus angoissant qu'un amour, c'était plus exigeant qu'une morale, c'était plus fort qu'un inceste, c'était plus asservissant qu'une religion mais cela ne dépendait que de moi, c'était plus sévère qu'un devoir de fidélité, c'était de ma part, un fabuleux entêtement, c'était un renoncement qui dépassait mon imagination, pour lequel j'arrivais au monde, ce n'était rien, c'était la passion', *La Folie en tête*, p. 50.
4. Isabelle de Courtivron, 'From Bastard to Pilgrim: Rites and Writing for Madame', *Yale French Studies*, 72 (1986), 133-48 (p. 140).
5. Information regarding the evolution of *Thérèse et Isabelle* was provided by Ghyslaine Charles-Merrien, author of *Violette Leduc ou le corps morcelé* (unpublished *thèse de doctorat*, Université de Haute Bretagne, Rennes II, 1988). The version of *Thérèse et Isabelle* I analyse is, obviously, the edition published by Gallimard in 1966. Charles-Merrien's study is the most stimulating exploration of Leduc's work that has appeared to date, and I will refer to it from time to time, even though it has not yet been accepted for publication.
6. *La Bâtarde*, p. 12.
7. Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires* (Oxford: OUP, 1993). For other Existentialist readings of Leduc's autobiographical discourse, see Maurice Nadeau, 'L'Existentialisme et ses à-côtés', in *Le Roman français depuis la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), pp. 133-35, and Jacques Brenner, 'Destin et liberté', in *Histoire de la littérature française* (Paris: Fayard, 1978), pp. 228-29.
8. Jean Snitzer Schoenfeld, 'La Bâtarde, or Why the Writer Writes', *French Forum*, 7 (1982), 261-88.

9. Philippe Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France* (Paris: Colin, 1971), p. 21.
10. Martha Noel Evans, 'La Mythologie de l'écriture dans *La Bâtarde* de Violette Leduc', *Littérature*, 12 (1982), 82–92.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
12. Martha Noel Evans, 'Writing as Difference in Violette Leduc's Autobiography', in Shirley N. Garner *et al.* (eds), *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 306–17 and 'Violette Leduc: The Bastard' in Evans, *Masks of Tradition* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 102–22.
13. Elaine Marks, 'I am my own Heroine: Some Thoughts about Women and Autobiography in France', in Sidonie Cassirer (ed.), *Female Studies IX: Teaching about Women in the Foreign Languages* (New York: Feminism Press, 1975), pp. 1–10.
14. Margaret Crosland, *Women of Iron and Velvet* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 201–10.
15. Germaine Brée, *Women Writers in France* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1973), p. 69, 81.
16. Germaine Brée, *La Littérature française* (vol. 16: le XXe siècle II, 1920–70) (Paris: Arthaud, 1978), p. 266.
17. Michèle Respaut, 'Femme/Ange, Femme/Monstre', *Stanford French Review* (Winter 1983), 365–74.
18. Marilyn Yalom, 'They Remember Maman', *Essays in Literature*, 8 (1981), 73–90; Colette Hall, 'L'Écriture Féminine and the Search for the Mother in the Works of Violette Leduc and Marie Cardinal', in Michel Guggenheim (ed.), *Women in French Literature* (Saratoga: Anma Libri, 1988), pp. 231–38.
19. Two anthologies of erotic writing include extracts from Leduc's work in which lesbian lovemaking is depicted: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, *Anthologies des lectures érotiques (de Félix Godin à Emmanuelle)* (Paris: Ramsay, 1980), pp. 14, 197, 448, 669; Claudine Brécourt-Villars, *Ecrire d'amour: anthologie de textes érotiques féminins* (Paris: Ramsay, 1985), pp. 45, 50, 283, 287.
20. Jane Rule, 'Violette Leduc', in *Lesbian Images* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 139–46.
21. Elaine Marks, 'Lesbian Intertextuality', in George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (eds), *Homosexualities and French Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 353–77.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 363.
23. Isabelle de Courtivron, 'Androgyny, Misogyny and Madness': *Three Essays on Women in Literature* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Brown University, 1973); Isabelle de Courtivron, 'Violette Leduc's *L'Affamée*: the Courage to Displease', *L'Esprit créateur*, 19 (1979), 95–102.
24. 'From Bastard to Pilgrim: Rites and Writing for Madame', *Yale French Studies*, 72 (1986), 133–48.
25. Isabelle de Courtivron, *Violette Leduc* (Boston: Twayne's World Authors Series, 1985).
26. Pièr Girard, *Œdipe Masqué* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1986).
27. Dominique Aury, 'Violette Leduc', *La Nouvelle Revue française* (March 1974), 114–16 (p. 114).
28. Roland Barthes, 'Les Deux Critiques', in *Essais critiques* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964), pp. 246–51 (p. 251).
29. Colette Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 233.
30. Charles-Merrien talks of a 'malédiction maternelle' against heterosexual sex and motherhood which she perceives as destructive and which is most in evidence in *Ravages*. Charles-Merrien, *op. cit.*, p. 69 and *passim*.
31. The concept of a maternal genealogy is central to the work of Luce Irigaray. Its significance and relevance to *Ravages* will be explored at the end of chapter 2.
32. Both Evans and Charles-Merrien argue that Leduc's unconscious need to occupy the place of her absconding, dead father caused her to perceive writing — traditionally deemed a male activity, particularly because of the conventional pen/penis equation — as a means to acquire a 'virile' or paternal/procreative status. According to Evans, 'for Leduc [. . .], literary creation becomes a strategy [through which] she usurps and steals the creative power of men' (*Masks of Tradition*, p. 107). Charles-Merrien suggests that writing represented for Leduc an 'accès à une virilité autonome et autorisée' (Charles-Merrien, *op. cit.*, p. 360). Charles-Merrien argues further (on the grounds of denigratory comments Leduc makes in *Trésors à prendre* about the 'femininity' of George Sand's novels) that although Leduc was aware of the

unequal relationship between the sexes and viewed the *venue à l'écriture* of women as a means to combat sexual inequality, her belief in the male character of literary/creative activity and of the women who pursued it means that neither she nor her writing may be considered wholeheartedly feminist: 'Toute l'ambiguïté des relations de Leduc avec le féminisme se résume ainsi: les femmes doivent écrire, elles peuvent rivaliser avec les hommes, mais seules les femmes viriles en sont capables! [...] L'Écriture est donc pour Violette le moyen d'accéder à la virilité en rompant avec le destin d'une femme soumise et dominée par l'homme, mais elle est surtout le moyen d'*arborer* cette virilité. En effet, il ne s'agit pas tant d'exister comme une femme libre et reconnue, que de jouer à l'homme. Et c'est en ce sens qu'on ne peut pas proprement parler de revanche féministe' (Charles-Merrien, op. cit., pp. 372-74). Chapter 4 will show that matters are more complex than these critics allow.

33. Jean Rousset, *Forme et signification* (Paris: José Corti, 1962), p. xvi.

34. For a comprehensive overview of different psychoanalytic approaches, see Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984).