

CHAPTER 3

THÉRÈSE ET ISABELLE: AN IDYLL ABANDONED

Constituting as it does a revised version of what was originally the opening section of *Ravages*, *Thérèse et Isabelle* contains themes and images which are also present in that novel; however, the account of female-to-female bonding which Leduc's 1966 novella offers is undoubtedly more radical, and more visionary, than that which emerges from *Ravages*. In *Thérèse et Isabelle*, whose focus is the electrically homoerotic relationship that exists between its eponymous, adolescent heroines, Leduc is writing in a pioneering mode. Her radicalism turns upon her representation of a sexual bond which is (largely) devoid of the problems the heroine of *Ravages* encounters in her dealings with her mother and her 'mother/lover', and which, arguably, anticipates that order of 'femmes-entre-elles' which Irigaray, in her writings of the 1980s, posits as both culturally unacknowledged and very necessary. Irigaray calls for the coming into being of such an order as early as 1974, in *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, yet presents it as currently inadmissible. Its inadmissibility, she claims, stems from the fact that the conditions of its possibility are problematized by the non-recognition, and inadequate symbolization, in a culture that is 'mono-sexual' and androcentric, of 'le désir de la femme pour elle-même [. . .] pour une même, la même'.¹ In this chapter, I intend to explore the nature of the sexual relation Leduc envisions in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, and to argue that while it proves to be transitory, it is characterized by a harmony which distinguishes it from the feminine familial/sexual bonds depicted in *Ravages*. My aim is also to demonstrate that in creating an account of what might be termed 'love of the same in the feminine', Leduc looks forward, instinctively, to Irigaray's vision of a female homosexual economy, based upon subject-to-subject relations of pleasure and desire between women.

'A HOMOSEXUALITY WHICH IS ENTIRELY FEMININE . . .'²

The Thérèse/Isabelle relation is not the only lesbian union to be scrutinized in the three texts under examination in this study. Although Cécile functions primarily as a maternal substitute in *Ravages*, she is also, obviously, Thérèse's sexual companion. However, the homoerotic tie that binds the two women in

the novel differs considerably from that portrayed in *Thérèse et Isabelle*. This is because in *Ravages* Cécile adopts *vis-à-vis* her lover a mode of behaviour which may be deemed ‘masculine’, which transforms her into a kind of pseudo-husband, and which metamorphoses her lesbian bond with Thérèse into a mime of a heterosexual marriage.³ Ironically, it is Cécile’s refusal of the ‘esclavage’ that the novel shows to be an integral part of heterosexual femininity which is the source of her pursuit of ‘masculinity’. This refusal is suggested in the following extract from *Ravages*, in which she addresses her rival, Marc, and declares her relief at not being a man:

- Se raser chaque matin . . . Quelle corvée. Je ne voudrais pas être un homme, dit Cécile.
- Et même si vous le vouliez . . .
- Il reprit:
- Le calendrier que vous regardez douze fois par an . . . “Nous ne le regardons jamais”, dit Cécile. (p. 104)

Cécile’s last words in the above passage convey her rejection of the model of femininity which emerges in *Ravages* as woman’s lot within the heterosexual relation (i.e. a femininity that leads ineluctably towards maternity, and entails restriction and enslavement). However, her unwillingness to accept feminine subordination paradoxically causes her to usurp the place of the resented male, and to assume a masculine gender role. Cécile turns herself, in other words, into a profoundly inauthentic personage, almost becoming ‘that figure referred to, in various times and circumstances, as the “mannish lesbian”, the “true invert”, the “bull dagger”, or the “butch”’.⁴

Cécile’s quest for ‘mannishness’, which is particularly apparent in the early part of the middle section of *Ravages*, is suggested in a number of ways. A conversation she has with Thérèse after Marc’s disruptive arrival in their ‘pavillon’ reveals that on occasion she indulges in a form of transvestism in order to evade the ‘normal’ femininity she despises:

- Je secouai Cécile:
- “Où est la chemise d’homme que tu avais achetée à Riva-Bella? Eveille-toi!
- Dans le carton vert . . .
- Lève-toi, cherche avec moi. Ne te rendors pas!”
- Cécile se leva. Elle arriva la première dans le cagibi, elle trouva la chemise d’homme, elle vérifia le col, les manchettes, les boutons, les boutonnières.
- “Crois-tu qu’il aura suffisamment chaud? C’est un frileux, dit-elle.
- Comment le sais-tu?
- Je sais que c’est un frileux”, redit Cécile.
- Elle tâta le tissu:
- “C’est rêche, c’est sec. Un homme . . . et dans la chemise d’homme que je m’étais achetée!” dit-elle. (p. 121)

This exchange does more than reveal Cécile’s readiness to employ the time-honoured strategy of vestimentary disguise as a means to modify her gender

identity. Since her insistence that Marc is a delicate 'frileux' suggests an attempt on her part to 'feminize' him, her remarks also indicate her need to undermine the masculinity of the males with whom she comes into contact. Her desire to appropriate the role and the authority of the men whose sexual attentions she shuns is also made apparent by the way in which she behaves towards Thérèse. On various occasions in the central section of *Ravages*, it becomes obvious that she seeks to transform her lesbian partner into a 'wife' and to impose upon her the passive femininity she herself has rejected. When, for example, Marc intrudes into their home, she instructs Thérèse 'Fais la maîtresse de maison' (p. 89), a comment that serves only to elicit an ironic smirk from their unwelcome visitor. Cécile seeks also to keep her lover within the protective/restrictive confines of their 'maison', and consistently adopts a 'ton protecteur' (p. 85) which irks Thérèse. Her efforts to enlist Marc's support in order to persuade Thérèse to stop working as a saleswoman confirm the reader's impression of the pseudo-marital nature of the relationship she seeks to share with her lover, and of her own assumption within that relationship of the position and function of a 'husband':

–[. . .] Vous ne pourriez pas, vous, la persuader de changer de métier? Elle s'use. C'est trop dur pour elle. Colporteur, ce n'est pas un métier de femme! Je ne cesse pas de le lui répéter. Elle ne veut pas que je travaille pour deux. (p. 110)

The homoerotic bond between the 'mannish' Cécile⁵ and Thérèse corresponds to a conventional vision of female homosexuality, inspired by Freud's 1920 essay 'The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman'.⁶ Since it is based to a considerable degree upon 'foreign', heterosexual gender positions, and implicitly involves a master/slave model of interaction too (because Leduc clearly equates heterosexuality with the master/slave dynamic in *Ravages*), it embodies what Cixous chooses to term 'Lesbianism'. A 'Lesbian' bond, according to Cixous, is a relationship which remains firmly within the phallic/patriarchal order, 'gives way to the latent "man-within", a man who is reproduced, who reappears in a power situation', and constitutes a union in which 'the phallus is still present'.⁷ Since the Thérèse/Cécile sexual union is evidently 'Lesbian' in the Cixousian sense, the reader never has the feeling of being invited to admire it, or to perceive it as in any way ideal. It is simply a counterfeit marriage, characterized, like Thérèse's relationship with Marc, by 'les ravages du jeu "maître-esclave"'.⁸ Indeed, it confirms the argument offered by Kristeva in her essay 'Eros maniaque, éros sublime' that even in a homoerotic encounter with another woman, 'une femme est entraînée dans la même dialectique d'affrontement au Phallus, avec tout le cortège [. . .] d'épreuves de domination-soumission qu'il suppose'.⁹ In the closing section of her essay, Kristeva includes an extremely pessimistic account of the possibilities intrinsic to lesbian interaction. She suggests that female homosexuality,

while it excludes men, cannot preclude a 'confrontation au pouvoir', because the construction of human (psycho)sexuality and the masculine nature of the libido mean that the erotic domain is irredeemably 'phallic' and that there can be no 'érotique du féminin pur'.¹⁰ If lesbianism seeks to avoid the 'affrontement au Phallus' that Kristeva posits as ineluctable, then, she claims, it simply ends up by reproducing the relation of fusion which exists between a mother and her child in the pre-natal period, and generates a 'mort de n'être qu'un on: identité perdue, dissolution léthale de la psychose, angoisse des frontières perdues'.¹¹ For the reader familiar only with *Ravages*, it would seem that Leduc echoes the Kristevan exegesis of lesbian interaction. Once we begin to explore the homoerotic bond she envisages in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, however, it becomes clear that this is not in fact the case. Unlike Thérèse and Cécile, the heroines of Leduc's later text enjoy a sexual relationship which, for much if not all of the time, 'functions [...] on the level of nonpower'¹² and which, moreover, does not lead to identity and boundary loss of the kind Kristeva evokes. Consequently, what Leduc offers, arguably, in *Thérèse et Isabelle* is a kind of utopian counterpoint to the vision of lesbianism Kristeva constructs in 'Eros maniaque, éros sublime'.

So how does Leduc represent feminine homoeroticism in her novella? The reader is given an account of only three of the days and two of the nights Thérèse and Isabella spend together. During this brief period, the lovers create a carnivalesque erotic idyll which, although it fails to endure, affords them a degree of fulfilment and pleasure which eludes the female protagonists of the other works explored in this study. That they achieve this is a consequence of the unique character of the bond they forge. Superficially, their relationship seems not to be entirely dissimilar to that which exists between Thérèse and Cécile. Isabelle frequently appears (to an even greater extent than Cécile, in fact) to be a dominant and domineering 'femme phallique',¹³ whose treatment of Thérèse is, on occasion, sadistic in the extreme. Her 'phallicity' is conveyed by the descriptions we are given, of which the following are the most striking, of her severity and her authoritarian behaviour towards her partner:

Elle était nue, sévère, très droite au milieu de la chambre. (p. 75)

Isabelle est prête à me poignarder. Cette idée me traversa pendant que je rangeais aussi les serviettes et les gants éponge sur la porte-serviette. J'attendis un coup de couteau.

[...]

Soudain, elle me tira par les cheveux. Elle enfonça son dard dans ma nuque. (pp. 36-37)

Son angoisse, son autorité, ses ordres, ses contre-ordres m'égarèrent. (p. 51)

Elle arrivait. Je comptais ses pas dans la grande allée. Quinze roulements de tambour ont passé sur mon cœur. Que de fois j'ai été exécutée pendant qu'elle venait. (p. 87)

The violently penetrative nature of certain of the sexual advances Isabelle makes to Thérèse intensifies our (initial) impression that she, like Cécile, is a 'mannish' lesbian, and that the bond she shares with her lover is consequently predicated once more upon a masculine/feminine, master/slave model:

La cordelière de ma robe de chambre tomba sur la descente de lit. Isabelle regardait ma chemise de nuit.

– Oh, dit-elle, que c'est blanc . . .

Elle me jeta sur son lit, elle entra mais elle dégaina tout de suite. Une petite fille avait soulevé le rideau, une petite fille nous regardait. Elle s'enfuit, elle hurla:

– Du sang, j'ai vu du sang.

– Rentre chez toi! commanda Isabelle.

Isabelle regarda ses trois doigts sanglants.

[. . .]

Je me glissai dans mon lit, je regardai la tache rouge sur ma chemise de nuit.

[. . .]

Je sortis de mon lit, je réparai les dégâts de ma guerrière. (p. 90)

In reality, however, the relationship between Thérèse and Isabelle is more complex and infinitely more ideal(ized) than the 'marriage' that unites Cécile and Thérèse in *Ravages*. The (phallic) violence which Isabelle directs at Thérèse does not in fact, for most of the novella, denote an authentic and damaging attempt on her part to accede to mastery. This is because, as the hyperbolic image of the 'guerrière' contained in the above extract hints, her sadism represents one element within a highly ritualized sexual game the lovers invent quite deliberately, a game based upon mutuality and assent, in which conventional master/slave, subject/object erotic positions are provisionally exploited, rather than being seriously and definitively adopted by either adolescent. Isabelle's assumption of a penetrative, violent mode of conduct *vis-à-vis* her partner is, in other words, primarily 'formal' and 'ludic', a fact that is signalled by her refusal to take her sadism beyond certain limits, or to manifest it outside the exclusive erotic space she and Thérèse create within the dormitory of their *collège* ('– Je veux t'étrangler. Je le veux, dit-elle. Mais elle ne serrait pas', p. 60). More importantly, she does not cling doggedly to the position of control and authority she manifestly occupies in the above passage. On a number of occasions, she surrenders her 'phallicity' to Thérèse, who takes on the dominant/sadistic role her lover has abandoned, so that their erotic stances are reversed:

J'entrais dans sa bouche comme on entre dans la guerre: j'espérais que je saccagerais ses entrailles et les miennes. (p. 30)

– Je voudrais vous manger.

Je l'ai poussée contre le mur, j'ai cloué ses mains avec la paume de mes mains. (p. 11)

J'étais sadique. Attendre et faire attendre est une délicieuse perte. (p. 50)

J'avais déclaré la guerre dans sa bouche [. . .]. (p. 98)

The erotic flexibility which characterizes the relationship between the lesbian adolescents and frees it from the threat of ossification is in evidence throughout *Thérèse et Isabelle*. It is most apparent in an episode that occurs towards the end of the tale, in which the lovers play with, exchange, and finally cast aside an imaginary penis and the oppositional, hierarchized gender positions phallocentric (hetero)eroticism imposes. As the scene begins, Thérèse is in the *dortoir*, in bed, in a state of semi-consciousness. By her are two roses she has earlier bought as a gift for Isabelle, which, like the 'mauvaises herbes' in *Ravages*, may be interpreted as phallic substitutes — Charles-Merrien comments, for instance, that in Leduc's writing, 'la rose est bien le symbole de la verge' and cites passages from *L'Affamée* where the link is made explicit.¹⁴ In a dream, Thérèse imagines how Isabelle begins to 'penetrate' her, with her own hand and with the rose-phallus:

Je rêvai: Isabelle tenait mon poignet, promenait ma main et les fleurs sur mon sexe. Je m'éveillai labourée, affamée. (p. 92)

However, when Isabelle actually arrives, she immediately renounces the 'virility' which Thérèse has dreamt she will manifest, and which is consolidated by her possession of the phallic roses Thérèse has offered her. She does so by returning the flowers to Thérèse and by inviting her lover to subject her to a mock decapitation, which, in Freudian terms, symbolizes 'castration' (as we saw in chapter two, Leduc exploits the decapitation/castration link in *Ravages* also). Isabelle's readiness to succumb to castration/decapitation is signalled here by the reference to her 'col Danton', by her baring of her neck, and by Leduc's narrator's reference, later on in the same episode, to her lover's 'tête décapitée' (p. 98):

Elle mit le verre et les roses dans mes mains, elle rejeta ses cheveux, elle me montra son col Danton, son cou. Ma lampe de poche et le verre à dents s'entrechoquaient. (p. 93)

Once Isabelle submits to 'castration', Thérèse assumes the phallic position her partner has cast off — this is suggested by the way in which her action with the flowers repeats that which she has earlier attributed to Isabelle, and by the fact that her behaviour is described as 'severe' — and takes charge of the intensely stylized sexual 'fête' the lovers share. By doing so, she transforms their sexual encounter from one which simply perpetuates the master/slave dynamic into one that overturns it:

Je promenais des guirlandes de bronze, je traînais des roses en fer forgé autour de son cou.

— La fête, la fête, dis-je sévèrement.

Isabelle protégeait son cou. Elle recula. (pp. 93–94)

The way in which Thérèse and Isabelle oscillate joyously between active and passive, phallic and non-phallic sexual roles suggests the richness of the

homoerotic 'fête' they create. Nevertheless, the facility with which they exchange these roles clearly cannot be taken as conclusive proof that their relationship represents an authentic *alternative* to what Cixous terms 'phallocracy'.¹⁵ The fact that neither girl is locked *permanently* into a position of (masculine) mastery or one of (feminine) passivity does not mean that they completely escape the 'affrontement au Phallus' which Kristeva regards as the essence of all erotic encounters. Other aspects of the end part of *Thérèse et Isabelle* hint however that the lovers do manage on occasion entirely to transcend the phallic master/slave dynamic Kristeva evokes. In the section of the text that follows the above extracts, Thérèse and Isabelle invent a homoerotic game in which the (imaginary) penis and the hierarchized roles associated with phallocentric sexuality play no part at all. This suggests that they succeed after all, at this point at least, in transgressing the heterosexual, 'maître/esclave' erotic norm in a way that does not occur within the Cécile/Thérèse relationship and manage, moreover, to break out of a phallic sociosexual order which, according to Irigaray, suppresses 'la spécificité du désir *entre femmes*' — in part because it cannot conceptualize it:¹⁶

Le trouble grandissait, le ciel en un seul nuage demeurait en moi. Nous nous appelions dans le blanc des yeux. Il fallait mourir ou bien se décider. Je suis venue:

– Ouvre ton col.

Je fermais les yeux, j'écoutais si elle ouvrait sa chemise de nuit.

– Je t'attends, dit Isabelle.

L'œil rose me regardait, la rose dans le verre à dents se penchait de leur côté. Mes bras sont tombés; je voulais bien devenir leur martyr. Ils m'envoyaient leurs rayons de tiédeur et déjà leur soie pesait dans mes mains vides. Je suis partie vers eux et, comme les fruits, ils ont mûri. Ils gonflaient: je leur confiais le soleil. Isabelle, adossée à la cloison, les regardait comme je les regardais.

– Ferme ton col, dis-je.

Le chuchotement d'une élève, comme les autres soirs, a rajeuni la nuit.

Isabelle souriait à sa gorge. Je sais où je l'aimerais si je l'avais encore: je l'aimerais sous le ventre des brebis.

Isabelle ouvrait ma chemise de nuit, Isabelle hésitait, Isabelle était avide. Je ne l'aidais pas: je jouissais de la convoitise d'une reine débraillée. Le soupir tomba de l'arbre du silence, deux gorges s'élançèrent, quatre foyers de douceur irradièrent. De l'absinthe coula dans mes veines. (pp. 94–95)

In this passage, an active/passive model of erotic interchange is replaced by one that is brought into being by the contact of four aroused female breasts ('deux gorges s'élançèrent, quatre foyers de douceur irradièrent'). In consequence, the hierarchization that inevitably arises when erotic communion is achieved via the invasion of one partner's body by the other's is diminished, making way for a much greater degree of sexual equality. The images of fecundity and nurturance which the extract contains suggest, moreover, that what we witness here is the generation of a kind of homoerotic pleasure which Cixous describes in her 1976 interview 'Rethinking Differences' as 'a sort of composite affection,

a maternal, sisterly, filial diffusion', and which seems to elude phallic erotic models and laws.¹⁷ Cixous's equation of lesbian eroticism and 'maternal' affection is sweeping and more than somewhat problematic. As Marianne Hirsch observes, the mother/daughter tie, belonging as it does to the patriarchal family unit, may be considered to be 'fraught with potential dangers' that are unlikely to inhere in intragenerational, sexual bonds between women of the same age, since such bonds stand a better chance of constituting 'a space of relations carefully situated [...] outside the structures of patriarchal institutions'.¹⁸ However, Cixous's comments regarding the pleasurable 'diffusion' feminine homoeroticism can/should engender help us to see that in the section of her novella where Leduc evokes the fruitful caresses of her lovers' 'foyers de douceur', an erotic encounter of an unusual — and arguably more 'feminine' — nature is being imagined.

Our impression that Thérèse and Isabelle create a sexual union which escapes (total) enclosure within the phallic libidinal order is intensified by the fact that the pleasure the adolescents experience is disseminated and all-embracing, and goes beyond the purely genital to take in the whole body. Leduc's lovers seem in fact to enjoy the 'jouissance différente',¹⁹ the pluralistic pleasure, which Irigaray presents in her controversial essay 'Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un' as being unique to women: 'La femme n'a pas un sexe. Elle en a au moins deux, mais non identifiables en uns. Elle en a d'ailleurs bien davantage. Sa sexualité, toujours au moins double, est encore *plurielle* [...] Or, la femme a des sexes un peu partout. [...] La géographie de son plaisir est bien plus diversifiée, multiple dans ses différences, complexe, subtile, qu'on ne l'imagine . . . dans un imaginaire un peu trop centré sur le même'.²⁰ Irigaray's argument is that women's sexual pleasure is basically multi-faceted and diffuse, but is both restricted and rendered unrepresentable within a patriarchal/phallogentric order in which the erotic 'space' is circumscribed by the dictates of male sexuality and especially by man's need to find a receptive vaginal 'trou-enveloppe' to take in and stimulate his penis.²¹ Since the erotic satisfaction Thérèse and Isabelle achieve is, as the following extract shows, highly pluralistic and conforms to Irigaray's contention that woman's pleasure (unlike man's 'monolithic', penile *jouissance*) comes from her entire anatomy, the reader gains the sense that such satisfaction — and the relation which engenders it — have, as Cixous puts it, effectively 'entered into the feminine':²²

Nous apprenions, nous retenions que les fesses sont des sensibles. Nos mains étaient si légères que je suivais la courbe du duvet d'Isabelle sur mon bras, la courbe de mon duvet sur son bras. Nous descendions, nous remontions avec nos ongles effacés la rainure de nos cuisses refermées, nous provoquions, nous supprimions les frissons. Notre peau entraînait notre main et son double. Nous emmenions les pluies de velours, les flots de mousseline depuis l'aine jusqu'au cou-de-pied, nous revenions en arrière, nous prolongions un grondement de douceur de l'épaule jusqu'au talon. Nous cessâmes.

– Je t’attends, dit Isabelle.

La chair me proposait des perles partout. (p. 105)

The intensity of the erotic pleasure Thérèse and Isabelle discover together enables each to commune with her partner in a privileged way. This is suggested by the references to their joined hands which recur throughout the novella (see pp. 63, 75, 99, 104, and 106). In *Ravages*, Thérèse’s heterosexual relationship with Marc and her pseudo-marriage with Cécile both excluded this particular form of human communication. In *Thérèse et Isabelle*, however, the lovers’ hands (and bodies) are so constantly in contact that the two girls appear on occasion to attain a state of almost total intersubjective connection:

Je plongeai ma main dans l’eau, je remis l’épingle dans ses cheveux.

– Je veux cette main, dit-elle.

Elle me glaçait en me choyant. J’étais séparée de ma main que je ne reconnaissais pas. (p. 14)

– Plus souple, dit-elle, à la main qui n’était plus la mienne, qu’elle guidait. (p. 22)

La main d’Isabelle qui me troublait autour de ma hanche c’était la mienne, ma main sur le flanc d’Isabelle, c’était la sienne. (p. 105)

Other passages within the novella reinforce our awareness of the intermingling of self and other which the adolescents’ homoerotic activities allow them to achieve:

Nous nous accordions tant que nous disparaissions. (p. 23)

Elle venait, elle respirait par mes poumons. (p. 48)

Je recevais ce qu’elle recevait, j’étais Isabelle. (p. 52)

Je voyais ce qu’elle voyait et ce qu’elle écoutait avec la vue et l’ouïe de notre sexe, j’attendais ce qu’elle attendait. (p. 78)

The interpersonal mingling which is suggested in the above extracts constitutes, according to Bataille, the very essence of the erotic experience, and explains why erotic pleasure is so often likened to death — his point being that eros and thanatos, in their different ways, both engender a ‘sens de la continuité de l’être’, with the result that ‘de l’érotisme il est possible de dire qu’il est l’approbation de la vie jusque dans la mort’.²³ Bataille argues moreover that for a relation of erotic continuity to come into being, a form of violation has to occur, by means of which the boundaries between normally discontinuous human individuals are temporarily and violently shattered (‘Essentiellement, le domaine de l’érotisme est le domaine de la violence, le domaine de la violation. [...] Que signifie l’érotisme des corps sinon une violation de l’être des partenaires?’).²⁴ Within heterosexual sex, Bataille suggests, it is the male partner who functions as the ‘boundary breaker’, who perpetuates the act of violation, while the woman merely submits to it.²⁵ In

Thérèse et Isabelle, however, the erotic intermingling which Bataille evokes and which the adolescents certainly enjoy does not (as much of the above discussion indicates) appear to depend on the lovers' adoption of the unequal roles of 'boundary-breaker' and 'partie féminine dissoute'. It is not, in other words, the product of a violent violation of subjective isolation, but rather the result of total, harmonious, self/other communion. More importantly, although self and other are shown to intermingle in the novella, what we do not see is a concomitant *loss* of autonomy and subjectivity. It is this fact which distinguishes the lesbian relation Leduc constructs in *Thérèse et Isabelle* from the other fundamental female bond on which her writing focuses — i.e. that which exists between mothers and daughters. In *Ravages*, Leduc stresses the problems of non-individuation and identity loss that the mother/daughter relation can impose. As the next section of my chapter will demonstrate, a key feature of *Thérèse et Isabelle* is her emphasis on the *absence*, in the homoerotic relationship she chronicles in her novella, of these problematic phenomena.

LESBIAN MIRROR-BONDING

In *Ravages*, the difficulties engendered by the entangled, unmediated nature of the mother/daughter relation are made very apparent. That the same difficulties do not characterize the lesbian bond Leduc depicts in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, even though it too involves identification and self/other commingling, is (paradoxically) suggested in the novella by references to mirrors and to asphyxiation. In *Ravages*, suffocation and self/other mirroring are evoked in order to highlight the negative aspect of the mother/daughter dynamic. By contrast, in *Thérèse et Isabelle* they suggest the non-conflictual, privileged character of the feminine homoerotic bond portrayed in the work.

In *Thérèse et Isabelle*, as in *Ravages*, mirror-imagery is employed in order to convey the identificatory nature of the relationship between its two principal female protagonists. Throughout the text, the lovers' capacity for mutual 'reflection' is stressed repeatedly.²⁶ It is very clear however that lesbian reflective identification differs from that which prevails within the mother/daughter relationship. In part one of *Ravages*, the specular nature of her bond with her mother is shown to transform Thérèse into a paralysed reflection of her maternal parent and, therefore, to deprive her of her own individual, subjective identity. In *Thérèse et Isabelle*, on the other hand, the mirroring process is a much more equal one, and seems in consequence to allow both lovers to gain a heightened sense of self, as well as of interpersonal communion. When the lesbian adolescents 'reflect' each other, the reader senses that each girl becomes a subject in her own right and that mutual mirroring does not engender a hierarchized subject/object, self/reflection encounter, in which one partner loses her autonomy. Consequently, *Thérèse et Isabelle* anticipates the

vision of 'ideal' lesbian mirroring Irigaray evokes in her poetic essay 'Quand nos lèvres se parlent', whose narrator informs her lover: 'Entre nous, l'une n'est pas la "vraie", l'autre sa copie, l'une l'original(e), l'autre son reflet'.²⁷ The positive qualities imputed in Leduc's novella to lesbian specularly are particularly evident in the following extract:

La main d'Isabelle qui me troublait autour de ma hanche c'était la mienne, ma main sur le flanc d'Isabelle, c'était la sienne. Elle me reflétait, je la reflétais: deux miroirs s'aimaient. Notre promenade à l'unisson ne changea pas quand elle rejeta sa chevelure, quand je repoussai le drap. (p. 105)

The risk of identity loss and of enclosure within the maternal orbit that daughters can face is suggested in *Ravages* by references not only to mirrors but also to asphyxiation. In *Thérèse et Isabelle*, however, 'étouffement' is presented positively, as a privileged state which both partners appreciate, because it permits them to consolidate their erotic union:

Nous nous serrions jusqu'à l'étouffement. (p. 9)

– Plus fort, plus fort . . . Serrez à m'étouffer, dit-elle. (p. 10)

J'ouvris la bouche, [son sein] entra. Je croquais dans les veines précieuses, je me souvenais du bleuté: il m'étouffait. (p. 95)

The fact that Thérèse's identificatory relationship with her lover does not undermine her sense of her own individual subjectivity but rather enhances it is conveyed by two key fragments of the novella. In the first, in which she silently addresses Isabelle, Thérèse indicates how their union has meant that she has emerged from the state of non-being in which she previously felt herself to be enclosed: 'J'ai trouvé en te rencontrant un sens à mon néant' (p. 100). In the second, Thérèse suggests that far from precluding selfhood, her interpenetrative bond with Isabelle has made it accessible to her. Self/other commingling has, in other words, engendered identity instead of obliterating it: 'Enfin j'étais moi-même en cessant de l'être, enfin' (pp. 106–07).

Clearly, if the homoerotic relationship described in *Thérèse et Isabelle* is a 'relation duelle, spéculaire, d'indistinction, de confusion de soi et de l'autre',²⁸ i.e. a kind of 'imaginary' union, it is not one which involves its participants in an alienating loss of subjectivity.²⁹ In this respect, the lesbian relation portrayed in the novella evidently remains distinct from the mother/daughter bond, notably as it is depicted in *Ravages*. Elements of *Thérèse et Isabelle* do however suggest that the relationship between the adolescents is not entirely dissimilar to a mother/daughter relationship. On two occasions, Thérèse likens the almost palpable tie between herself and her lover to a kind of umbilical cord, a 'fil de l'attente' (p. 99), and a 'maillon' (p. 105). More importantly, images that are employed to suggest the nature of her erotic union with Isabelle are also used in the account the reader is given of the blissful relationship Thérèse

shared with her mother before the latter's cataclysmic marriage (*Thérèse et Isabelle*, like *Ravages*, contains evocations of a lost mother/daughter idyll, that preceded the mother's marital 'defection'). This increases our impression that the two bonds are not completely unlike.

In *Thérèse et Isabelle*, as in *Ravages*, Thérèse's past, exclusive (pre-œdipal?) relation with her mother is associated both with the pastoral realm (pp. 19, 20) and with the notion of a 'fête'. This is made apparent in a passage which describes how sensations provoked by the pressure of Isabelle's head on Thérèse's breasts arouse in Thérèse memories of happiness shared in the past with her mother, and which therefore encourages us to look for similarities between the lesbian and mother/daughter relationships evoked within the text:

– Étouffe-moi, dit Isabelle.

Elle se reposait pendant que je l'étouffais et que je m'efforçais de la changer en grain de beauté sur mon sein gauche. Je la serrais, j'avais le frisson à la pointe de l'herbe en hiver.

– Oui, tu m'aimes, dit Isabelle.

Je me soulevais, j'avais les diamants du froid sur mes épaules.

Je me souvenais, je me retrouvais sous le pommier: ma mère m'emmenait dans une prairie pour une fête très personnelle quand le vent d'hiver bousculait avril, quand le vent d'été engourdisait novembre. Nous nous installions deux fois l'an sous le même pommier, nous débballions notre goûter tandis que le vent entrait dans notre bouche, sifflait dans notre chevelure. Nous étendions le foie gras sur du gros pain, nous buvions le champagne dans le même verre à bière, nous fumions une Camel, nous regardions les frissons de jeunesse du blé en herbe, les frissons de vieillesse du chaume sur les toits. Le vent, manège d'éperviers, tournait au-dessus de notre amour et de notre goûter. (p. 103)

Three aspects of the above extract suggest parallels between the lost maternal/filial idyll it describes and the homoerotic tie between Thérèse and Isabelle which is the main focus of Leduc's narrative. Firstly, the fact that Thérèse's defunct idyllic relation with her mother is likened to a 'fête très personnelle' reminds us of the lesbian union between the adolescent lovers, because that relationship is also presented on several occasions as a 'fête', of a nocturnal, erotic nature ('Nous avons créé la fête de l'oubli du temps', p. 30; 'Je braquai ma lampe de poche, j'éclairai les fleurs que j'avais achetées, je goûtai à l'atmosphère de gala', p. 89). Secondly, the setting in which the mother/daughter 'fête' occurs, the 'prairie', recalls images employed elsewhere in the novella in connection with the secret space of desire and *jouissance* Thérèse and Isabelle generate within the confines of their *collège*.³⁰ Early on in the novel, this is compared by Thérèse to a 'jardin' (p. 13), access to which she senses she must eventually lose. Later on, the lovers' sexual space, or rather the trace of it that remains as dawn interrupts their embraces, is likened to '[d]es prés laitieux et mouillés' (p. 33). Later still, when Thérèse is overwhelmed by a vision of a natural domain outside the *collège* in which she might love Isabelle

more freely than she is able to inside it, her evocation of the imaginary 'blés' (p. 44) where she will undress her partner looks forward once more to the mother/daughter 'prairie' described in the 'fête' passage reproduced above. Thirdly, the account of the mother/daughter idyll contained in the extract establishes an association between love and eating ('Le vent, manège d'éperriers, tournait au-dessus de notre amour et de notre goûter'). Significantly, a similar association is in evidence in the descriptions we are given of certain of the caresses Thérèse and Isabelle exchange, caresses which suggest that the lesbian lovers transform ingestion into an extreme expression of homoerotic desire.³¹

Je creusais dans son cou avec mes dents, j'aspirais la nuit sous le col de sa robe: les racines d'un arbre frissonnèrent. (p. 10)

Soudain, elle me tira par les cheveux. Elle enfonçait son dard dans ma nuque. (p. 37)

J'ouvris la bouche, il entra. Je croquais dans les veines précieuses [. . .]. (p. 95)

Isabelle se soulevait, lente, lente, ses lèvres intimes se refermaient sur ma hanche. (p. 100)

Isabelle se souleva, elle mordilla une mèche de mes cheveux:
Ensemble, dit-elle. (p. 106)

Clearly, then, there are various elements of the homoerotic bond Thérèse shares with Isabelle which link it to her (earliest) relationship with her mother, as well as aspects of her union with Isabelle which make it apparent to the reader (particularly a reader familiar with *Ravages*) that the erotic dynamic between the lovers does not merely reproduce a mother/daughter relation. Critics who have studied *Thérèse et Isabelle* hitherto have tended to focus uniquely on the parallels which exist between the two relationships, and to imply that these reveal that Thérèse, driven by bitterness at her mother's 'betrayal', is simply endeavouring to establish with Isabelle a *substitute* maternal/filial relation. This particular reading, although valid up to a point,³² overlooks the key fact that what Thérèse and her lover are actually shown to achieve in the novella is the creation of a bond which recuperates the more positive aspects of the mother/daughter relation but which distances those elements of it that generate conflict. Thérèse and Isabelle form a union which allows the resurrection of the privileged, mutual communion Thérèse enjoyed with her mother in the past, but which does not involve the problems of non-individuation and self/other enclosure that the mother/daughter connection can engender. In view of this, the relations between Leduc's lovers may be likened once again to those depicted in Irigaray's 'Quand nos lèvres se parlent', which, according to Carolyn Burke, 'partake of the pre-œdipal relations between mothers and daughters without, however, recreating their roles.

Resurrected in the present this [...] paradise of mutual affection does not resemble the psychoanalysts' description of [...] crises over the need for individuation. There is no need to seal off the self from the other'.³³

In the final analysis, what kind of bond is Leduc charting for much — if not all — of her novella? As the latter section of my discussion has indicated, it is clearly the sort of union which Marianne Hirsch describes as 'offering only the benefits and not the pitfalls of same-sex bonding'.³⁴ It makes accessible a unique — and perhaps uniquely *female* — type of erotic pleasure. It stimulates an idyllic mode of self/other, female-to-female exchange, without imposing a loss of individuality and subjective status. Arguably, it represents a relationship whose essence is predicated upon a contiguity which maintains differentiation and subjectivity (hence the insistently *singular* pronouns present in the key account we are offered of lesbian mirroring: 'Je la reflétais, elle me reflétait, *deux* miroirs s'aimaient', p. 105), rather than upon that continuity which is so characteristic of the mother/daughter tie, and which engenders a fusion that destroys subjectivity. It is in part Leduc's signalling, in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, of the absence of damaging fusion in the sexual bond she creates which suggests that her novella may productively be read as a forerunner of Irigaray's accounts of what a 'female homosexual economy' might involve. In the following pages, the significance of this concept, and the kind of thinking which led Irigaray to privilege it, will be explored in further — if inevitably overschematic — detail.³⁵ This will enable us, *inter alia*, to understand why Leduc may be considered to have produced, in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, an innovative and pioneering text.

As the introduction to this chapter and the concluding section of chapter two indicated, Irigaray is much exercised by the problems attendant upon female subject-to-subject relations, and upon (the emergence of an order of) 'l'amour du même entre femmes ou au féminin', i.e. love of the same in the feminine.³⁶ One of the explanations she offers for the difficulties which she perceives to exist within female (intersubjective) relationships connects to the fact that patriarchal culture is constructed, in her view, upon an 'échange des femmes'³⁷ between men. This, she argues, means that woman has the status of object, which obviously problematizes the notion of feminine intersubjectivity. More importantly, she relates the unworkability of all of those bonds which may be subsumed under the 'umbrella' title of *entre-femmes* to the absence, in the symbolic order in its current form, of words, images and codes which symbolize female relationships adequately, and thereby somehow mediate them, allowing them space to exist and function. In *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* and 'Misère de la psychanalyse', for instance, she argues that because relations between women, love and desire between women, are still without any real possibility of signification within language, and can barely even be imagined in the ruling, 'hom(m)osexual/centric' system of representation, they are virtually doomed

to dysfunctionality.³⁸ The symbolic inadequacy which Irigaray foregrounds stems, in her opinion, from the prototypical occlusion of the bond between mothers and daughters. The non-symbolization of the mother/daughter relation is, in other words, paradigmatic — and generative — of the dearth of symbolic and imaginary territory accorded to 'love of self on the side of women'.³⁹

Irigaray's essential point (if so complex a body of argumentation can be reduced to an 'essence') is that because feminine interrelation — whether 'vertical' (fille → mère, mère → fille) or 'horizontal' ('l'entre-femmes, ou entre "sœurs")⁴⁰ — cannot be properly articulated/conceptualized in the symbolic as it stands, relationships between women are impelled into unmediated proximity/fusion, competition, or unworkability. As long as women have insufficient access to a 'maison de langue'⁴¹ which might allow them to speak, and speak of, their 'amour du/de la même', there can be no possibility of individuation, interaction or encounter between them. The way to remedy this situation is to provoke a change in the symbolic order, a change in discourse. The symbolic needs, Irigaray argues, to be modified in such a way as to admit symbolic forms which would allow women to signify, appropriately, their distinct identity from, and desire for, other women — notably their mothers.⁴² A precondition of such change is the recognition not only of the existence and validity of a 'généalogie féminine' — the genealogical order of mothers and daughters referred to at the end of chapter two of this study — but also of an order of 'entre-femmes', a feminine homosexual economy. This latter concept sums up what Irigaray perceives to be still fundamentally lacking. It suggests a recognized social and discursive space allotted to loving, mediated and symbolized subject-to-subject relations between women. It would, amongst other things, be generative of culturally embodied representations of female-to-female bonds, which would 'correct' the deforming versions of these bonds that the masculine imaginary has engendered to date.

So how does all of this relate to *Thérèse et Isabelle*? In her novella, Leduc is clearly imagining a relation of feminine differentiation, desire and specificity (love of the same), which is not modelled on phallogocentric (hetero)sexuality, and which does not, more importantly, succumb to the various instances of dysfunctionality — fusion, rivalry etc. — that are imposed upon women, according to Irigaray, by a 'pathological' symbolic-social order. This alone makes it tempting to read Leduc's text as containing an account of lesbian love which looks forward to Irigaray's vision of what an economy of 'entre-femmes' might ideally entail. There is, moreover, another reason for perceiving Leduc as a kind of Irigarayan *avant la lettre*, and for treating *Thérèse et Isabelle* as a proto-Irigarayan production. This derives from the potential impact of Leduc's novella. One of the suggestions Irigaray makes in *Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère* is that, in spite of the lack of suitable representational precedents, it is

possible — and indeed imperative — to produce positive conceptualizations of feminine bonds, of the kind that the women's movement and women writers have evolved in recent times. The creation of such conceptualizations, she infers, has the subversive effect of modifying the misrepresentational images of 'l'entre-femmes' which the patriarchal imagination offers us, and may therefore help to provoke the change in the symbolic she deems so necessary. Taking the mother/daughter tie as her example, she contends that 'la relation mère/fille, fille/mère constitue un noyau extrêmement explosif dans nos sociétés. La penser, la changer revient à ébranler l'ordre patriarcal'.⁴³ In *Thérèse et Isabelle*, Violette Leduc is envisaging the currently unacknowledged, the buried — i.e. the possibility of feminine intersubjectivity and female-to-female love. In so doing, she is undermining the coherence of a sociocultural and discursive order that offers women too few figurations of love of the same in the feminine — and may consequently be considered to be anticipating, and responding to, the 'call to arms' Irigaray articulates in *Le Corps-à-corps*. For this reason, and despite its apparently 'apolitical' colour (compared, say, to Wittig's 'aggressive' *Le Corps lesbien*), we can read *Thérèse et Isabelle* as a profoundly disruptive text. It is also a utopian text. It does not, however, suggest that the bringing into being of subject-to-subject relations between women is an easy option. It is with an analysis of this final dimension of Leduc's novella that I shall bring this chapter to a close.

ARCADIA ABANDONED

The relationship of self/other desire and 'contiguity' — it is worth noting, in parenthesis, that Margaret Whitford locates contiguity as the symbol *par excellence* of Irigaray's vision of a female homosexual economy⁴⁴ — which obtains between Thérèse and Isabelle, for all its perfection, ultimately comes to grief. This is because it can only exist within the cocooned, all-female world of the *collège* Thérèse and Isabelle inhabit. Once Leduc's lovers encounter the public, heterosexual sphere that lies beyond the walls of their gynaeceum, their privileged union starts to disintegrate.

The *collège* functions as a 'maison de rendez-vous' (p. 55), inside which Thérèse and Isabelle are able to create their own 'private space of desire'.⁴⁵ While the lovers remain within its confines, it acts as a rampart separating them from the world of social and sexual normality which exists outside it and proves hostile to the adolescents' lesbian union. Clearly, the school is not a completely friendly and protective environment, since although it shields Thérèse and Isabelle from the hostility of the public, external domain, its institutional character means that it also belongs to that domain. When Thérèse simulates a fainting fit after Isabelle has caressed her indiscreetly in the presence of other pupils, it is because the social, public, and consequently inimical aspect of the

collège milieu has come to the fore, and has become oppressively apparent to her: 'Je m'étais fait disparaître parce que je ne pouvais pas l'aimer en public: le scandale que je nous avais épargné retombait sur moi seule' (p. 40).

Even within the *collège*, the relationship between Thérèse and Isabelle is subjected to intangible forces of division. The assaults upon their homoerotic unity which the lovers face inside it are primarily aural and scopic. The sounds made by their classmates are particularly intrusive, and constantly threaten to disrupt Thérèse's communion with Isabelle:

Les cris, les rugissements, le bruit des conversations dans la cour venaient par rafales.

– Plus fort, plus fort . . . Serrez à m'étouffer, dit-elle.

Je la serrais mais je ne supprimais pas les cris, la cour, le boulevard et ses platanes. (pp. 9–10)

Les cris de la cour nous transperçaient. (p. 12)

Des petites filles nous disloquaient avec leurs cris. (p. 39)

The curious gaze of a fellow pupil also damages their unity on one occasion, bringing their embraces to an abrupt end:

Elle me jeta sur son lit, elle entra mais elle dégaina tout de suite. Une petite fille avait soulevé le rideau, une petite fille nous regardait. Elle s'enfuit, elle hurla:

– Du sang, j'ai vu du sang.

– Rentre chez toi! commanda Isabelle. (p. 90)

In spite of the intrusions to which Thérèse and Isabelle are exposed within the *collège*, it none the less affords them shelter and protection. It is only when they go beyond its boundaries and enter the town that their union is seriously undermined. This is because, by abandoning the feminine enclave which is the *collège* and the 'private space of desire' it encircles, Thérèse and Isabelle render themselves vulnerable, unwittingly, to an order of sociosexual conventionality and of lack and disjunction within which their relationship becomes anomalous. The unease and reluctance Thérèse manifests when Isabelle informs her that the two of them are to visit the local doctor suggests that she unconsciously intuitively what lies in store for them once they pass through the 'sortie interdite' (p. 46) of the school ('– On était bien ici, dis-je dans le brouhaha. [. . .] Nos rapports se défaisaient, mon cœur n'avait plus de forces. Sortir avec elle, c'était incroyable', p. 59). Isabelle, however, is determined that their excursion should take place, since she believes that it will provide them with an opportunity to love each other less inhibitedly than they can in the *collège*. It is for this reason that she takes Thérèse, once they have left the school, to Mme Algazine's brothel.

Like the *collège*, Mme Algazine's establishment is a 'maison de rendez-vous'; however, its effect upon the lovers' homoerotic unity, unlike that of the *collège*, is wholly injurious. Because it is a public place, a site of 'normal',

heterosexual, and commercial love, it represents the very antithesis of the 'private space of desire' to which the school affords Thérèse and Isabelle access. That it will impose division and disharmony upon the lovers is suggested even before they enter it. As they hesitate before the door of the 'maison' and Isabelle endeavours to convince her partner that they should go in, the images of separation and amputation contained in the description of their surroundings intimate to the reader the fate that awaits them:

- Nous arrivions sur une place avec une ronde d'arbres tout en moignons.
 – Tu te décides?
 – Je n'ose pas, dis-je.
 Nous tournions, furieusement autour des arbres amputés.
 – Alors? C'est oui ou c'est non?
 – Nous étions bien dans le collège . . .
 – On sera bien mieux que dans le collège, dit Isabelle. (p. 65)

The hostility of the brothel environment, and its status as part of a dominant heterosexual order that will damage the lovers' homoerotic, identificatory bond, are further implied by the account we are given of the interior of the 'maison' and of the individuals Thérèse and Isabelle encounter once they enter it. The brothel represents a grotesque travesty of the secret erotic universe they create at night, in the *dortoir* of their *collège*. This universe and the *jouissance* it affords the adolescents are consistently associated in the novella with the pastoral, the natural, and the wild.⁴⁶ The absurdly genteel, vulgar décor of Mme Algazine's 'dress shop' seems to parody, ironically, the savage, verdant imaginary world which is the arena for their nocturnal embraces:

[Il y avait] une courette agréablement encombrée de bégonias tubéreux, de lierres, de géraniums-lierres, de vignes en pot, de fougères, d'arrosoirs, d'étagères pour les plantes.
 [...]

Isabelle regardait un tableau avec des rochers orange, des vagues de confiture bleue. Les oiseaux qui chantaient dans les cages commentaient ce tableau. (p. 67)

The inhabitants of the 'maison', its proprietress and her bearded client, appear as (covertly) antagonistic to the lesbian lovers as the milieu in which Thérèse and Isabelle come across them. Both are superficially welcoming and even protective, but seek in their different ways to exploit the adolescents. The exaggerated politeness the 'barbu' displays when they first encounter him ('– Vous permettez, dit un barbu, vous permettez à moins que vous n'avez sonné. Dans ce cas . . .', p. 66) barely conceals a voyeuristic curiosity regarding their 'aberrant' sexuality ('– Vous connaissez sans doute le chemin, insinua-t-il d'une voix gourmande qui ne ressemblait pas à sa voix de dehors', p. 66). The 'maternal' kindness Mme Algazine manifests ('– Entrez, mais entrez donc . . . La voix venait d'une montagne de bienveillance', p. 67) masks a desire to profit financially from the lovers' need for privacy (–L'électricité coûte cher, le

pétrôle aussi, l'huile aussi, les allumettes aussi. Tout coûte cher, dit Mme Algazine avec la voix de sa vraie nature', p. 70). Moreover, Mme Algazine and the 'barbu' seem the very embodiment of a heterosexual *état civil* in which the ineffable union Thérèse and Isabelle have forged inside the *collège* is metamorphosed into something that is freakish and asocial. They form a legislative, quasi-parental couple, whose reactions convey to the lovers that the bond they share is 'abnormal'. Mme Algazine's dismissive treatment of the adolescents makes this particularly apparent:

Isabelle se leva:

– Nous sommes ici pour une chambre.

Mme Algazine nous considérait et jouait avec son collier.

– Nous désirons la louer pour une heure environ, dit Isabelle.

La cage accrochée à l'anneau de la suspension se balançait, l'oiseau pépiait sous la coupole de porcelaine.

– Je vois, dit Mme Algazine.

Elle rejeta son collier de perles dans son dos.

– Vous êtes mineures, dit-elle. (p. 68)

– Nous voulons vous louer une chambre, vous dis-je.

Mme Algazine ouvrit ses yeux:

– Pourquoi ne m'avez-vous dit cela en arrivant, mes petites filles?

– On vous l'a dit.

Les ailes, parfois, se meurtrissaient aux barreaux des cages, la blessure dans notre esprit était grise.

– Vous êtes mineures? . . . Évidemment. (p. 69)

It is when Thérèse and Isabelle reach the room Mme Algazine rents them that the inimical character of the public/heterosexual space manifests itself most clearly, and it becomes obvious that by entering the brothel the lovers have entered a world governed by lack and disunity. The accelerated, feverish nature of the caresses Isabelle and Thérèse exchange inside the room indicates to the reader that they are reacting unconsciously to the hostility of their environment and are attempting to combat it by racing through as many of their habitual erotic rituals as possible. Their failure to 'recognize' each other as they do so hints that their efforts are likely to be in vain:

Ma bouche rencontra sa bouche comme la feuille morte la terre. Nous nous sommes baignées dans ce long baiser, nous avons récité nos litanies sans paroles, nous avons été gourmandes, nous avons barbouillé notre visage avec la salive que nous échangeons, nous nous sommes regardées sans nous reconnaître. (p. 71)

In the brothel bedroom, the forces of disjunction the lovers encounter even in the *collège* gain significantly in intensity. As in the school, these forces manifest themselves aurally and visually. Whereas Thérèse and Isabelle were able however, while they remained inside the *collège*, to transcend them, they find it increasingly difficult to do so in Mme Algazine's 'maison'. The sounds which damage and undermine their unity and their erotic communion are those made

by a heterosexual couple in an adjoining room. Thérèse's growing preoccupation with these noises (whose 'regular' rhythm makes the heterosexuality of the couple quite apparent) inhibits the pleasure to which the lovers' erotic exchanges have accustomed them:

– On remue dans la chambre à côté, dis-je.

Elle se dressa. Je la dévastais lorsque je la faisais attendre.

[. . .]

– Je veux que tu viennes, dit Isabelle.

– Le bruit de notre lit la nuit . . .

– Ce n'est pas le bruit de notre lit la nuit, dit Isabelle.

Je prêtai l'oreille. Le rythme régulier ne ressemblait pas au rythme saccadé dans la cellule d'Isabelle.

– Qui est-ce?

– Un couple. (pp. 71–73)

The scopic assaults to which the adolescents are subjected in their rented bedroom are the work of a faceless (and possibly imaginary) voyeur, whose diaphanous but intrusive presence Thérèse strongly intuit. The voyeurism episode chronicled in this part of *Thérèse et Isabelle* inevitably reminds us of the section of *Ravages* in which Marc spies on Thérèse and Cécile; however, in contrast to that scene, we — like Leduc's lovers — do not know the identity of the voyeur hiding in Mme Algazine's 'maison de rendez-vous', and are not even sure that he/she exists. The existence in *Ravages* as well as in *Thérèse et Isabelle* of 'scenes of spying' makes plain the thematic centrality, in Leduc's writing, of 'le regard'. Interestingly, *La Bâtarde* contains a further scene of voyeurism, which also takes place in a 'maison de rendez-vous', in the Rue Godot de Mauroy in Paris (see *La Bâtarde*, pp. 225–30). In this third episode, Leduc's protagonist Violette makes love to her lesbian partner Hermine in front of a male voyeur, who is paying for the privilege of watching them, in order to buy a green lacquer table she covets, and, arguably, to 'usurp' the virility of the male observer.⁴⁷ Violette's behaviour and responses here differ considerably from those of the heroine/narrator of *Thérèse et Isabelle*, who feels nothing but fear once she senses that she and her partner are being scrutinized by a third party. The terror Thérèse experiences, which Isabelle does not share, increases the disharmony between the adolescent lovers, and prevents them from attaining the state of mutual satisfaction they normally achieve:

– Il y quelqu'un. Je l'ai vu.

– Tu me tortures!, dit Isabelle. (p. 79)

– Tu es infernale. Je finirai par te maudire, dit Isabelle, qui se crispait.

– On nous voit, on nous regarde, me suis-je plainte.

– Où cela?

Isabelle s'était remise sur le ventre: elle secouait les barreaux du lit.

– Il y a un œil. Je le vois.

– Tais-toi, tais-toi! Presque . . . Presque . . . Cela monte, cela monte, dit Isabelle. Elle se tourna sur le dos, elle plia ses jambes qu'elle ramena au creux de son estomac. Elle se consumait.

– C'est ma faute si tu n'as rien, dis-je.

– Je n'aurai rien et c'est ta faute, dit Isabelle.

– Sur la vitre . . . L'œil . . . (p. 80)

The forces of division to which Thérèse and Isabelle are exposed in Mme Algazine's establishment have a profoundly destabilizing effect upon their relationship. Each girl reacts to them in a very different fashion. Thérèse seems to feel compelled, particularly by the aural intrusions she and Isabelle encounter, to distance herself from her lover and from the homoerotic union which has hitherto satisfied her entirely. This is suggested by the description we are given of the mesmeric effect the sounds made by the heterosexual couple in the next room exert upon her:

– Le bruit recommence.

Je ne pouvais pas m'arracher à cette cadence régulière.

– Écoute!

– Je n'entends rien, dit Isabelle.

J'étais captive du rythme, j'étais condamnée à le suivre, à le souhaiter, à le redouter, à me rapprocher de lui. (p. 74)

This passage indicates that at this stage Thérèse is being powerfully, if unconsciously, drawn to the sexual 'normality' embodied by the couple whose activities she overhears. Her perception of their rhythm as captivating, regular, and somehow *souhaitable* implies this strongly, and suggests that she is succumbing here not to the influence of an intrusive, phallic/paternal male, as the (œdipal) heroine of *Ravages* does, but rather to the less palpable, insidious imperatives of the order of heterosexual and social conventionality to which she and Isabelle have ill-advisedly exposed themselves. Our sense that this is the case is strengthened by the fact that whereas Isabelle is able to ignore and dismiss their aroused neighbours, Thérèse becomes increasingly willing to accord them importance:

On ouvrit, on referma une porte.

– C'est *le* couple!

Isabelle étouffa un bâillement:

– Oui, *un* couple. (p. 77, my emphasis)

The reader's impression that Thérèse is being pulled in the brothel towards sexual 'normality' is further reinforced by the account the episode contains of her uncharacteristically negative reaction to the sight of Isabelle's vagina. Normally, she idolizes its complex and convoluted form; here, however, she appears to long for contact with a more simple, and different, sex organ, the penis her lesbian partner lacks. Indeed, Thérèse may be considered to manifest at this point the contempt for the female 'sexe qui n'en est pas un' that Irigaray

suggests to be the norm in a patriarchal cultural order in which the phallus and the ‘phallogomorphic’ — the single, the stable and the unified — are privileged:⁴⁸

Elle ouvrait ses cuisses.

– Si tu ne veux pas, dis-le.

Je plongeai dans le sexe. J’aurais mieux aimé qu’il fût plus simple. J’avais presque envie de le recoudre partout. (p. 77)

Another, apparently innocent reflection of Thérèse’s strengthens still further our sense that in the ‘maison de rendez-vous’ she becomes increasingly alienated from the homoerotic rites which, in the *collège*, satisfied her completely:

– Longtemps, longtemps, psalmodiait Isabelle.

Je donnais comme un disque détraqué qui se répète. Son plaisir commençait chez moi. Je revins à l’air libre. (p. 78)

The image of the ‘disque détraqué’ contained in the above extract suggests to the reader that Thérèse feels that in loving Isabelle she has somehow followed the wrong course, or gone astray, and that her lesbian eroticism constitutes a sexual aberration — particularly since the notion of ‘détraquement’ is also associated with lesbianism (as aberration) in *Ravages*, by Marc (‘[Marc] me lâcha: “Toi, les femmes t’ont détraquée”’, p. 244). The repetitive licking of her lover’s genitals in which their homoerotic exchange involves her, even though it assures not only Isabelle’s pleasure but also her own, seems at this point almost to be a source of irritation to Thérèse, which she is keen to abandon (‘Je revins à l’air libre’). This, along with the other elements of the brothel episode I have outlined, leaves the reader with a growing conviction that Thérèse submits in the ‘maison’ to the lure of ‘normality’, and that her submission is the consequence of the disruptions to which her union with Isabelle is made susceptible within the malevolent confines of Mme Algazine’s establishment.

Isabelle’s reaction to the forces of division she encounters in the brothel differs from Thérèse’s. Faced with these forces and with their alienating effect upon her lover, her response is to assume a more dominant, ‘phallic’ stance *vis-à-vis* Thérèse than she has previously sought to do. As Thérèse becomes increasingly uneasy and distant, Isabelle manifests more strongly her capacity for (phallic, objectifying) violence, with the result that this ceases to seem merely ludic or ritualized, as it does in the *collège*, and instead becomes genuinely menacing. The reader senses that whereas, in their ‘private space of desire’, Isabelle’s violence contributes positively to the carnivalesque sexual games in which she and Thérèse indulge, it becomes potentially destructive in the brothel, and consequently exposes the relation between the adolescents to the ‘ravages du jeu “maître-esclave”’ Kristeva associates with (phallic) eroticism. This becomes particularly apparent at the point in the brothel episode at which Thérèse’s obsession with the heterosexual couple reaches its climax:

– Moins de bruit. On se plaint, dis-je.

Quelqu'un était emmuré dans la chambre à côté de la nôtre, quelqu'un qui essayait de s'enfuir et qui n'y arrivait pas.

Isabelle limait ses ongles.

– Empêche-moi d'entendre! dis-je. Tiens, tu as une nouvelle lime . . . – J'en ai plusieurs, dit Isabelle.

Isabelle continuait de limer l'ongle du pouce.

La dernière plainte monta jusqu'à l'étoile polaire. La lime d'Isabelle grignotait le silence.

Isabelle remit sa lime dans son sac à main:

– Nous perdons notre temps. Pourquoi avons-nous loué cette chambre?

– Je ne sais plus, dis-je.

Isabelle me gifla.

– Je ne sais plus, je ne sais plus . . .

Isabelle me donna une autre gifle.

– C'est un couple. Il y a un couple près de nous, dis-je.

Elle prit le guéridon, elle le lança contre le marbre de la cheminée. La fureur d'Isabelle m'enchantait. (pp. 74–75)

Two of Isabelle's actions in the above extract highlight the extent to which she modifies her behaviour towards Thérèse inside the antagonistic universe of the brothel, and hint at the further disequilibrium this provokes within the adolescents' relationship. Firstly, the account the passage contains of her activities with her nail file suggests that in the rented bedroom she feels compelled seriously to seek out a position of mastery, instead of simply playing with 'phallicity' as she has done before. In the *collège*, she stops using her 'lime' (a power symbol) in Thérèse's presence and throws it away, because she perceives that her possession of it reveals her capacity to be a dominant 'femme phallique', and threatens the harmony of her ('feminine') union with her lover:

– Ne limez pas vos ongles. Cessez.

Isabelle ouvrit la fenêtre de ma cellule.

– Vous avez jeté votre lime?

– Elle vous déplaisait, dit Isabelle. (p. 36)

In the brothel, however, Isabelle is driven to flaunt her 'lime' before Thérèse and, implicitly, to indulge in the kind of symbolic phallic power-play she has hitherto avoided. Secondly, the blows she inflicts upon Thérèse in the latter part of the extract also indicate that the nature of her response to her lover is undergoing a metamorphosis. The desire to strike Thérèse which Isabelle manifests in the brothel bedroom, since she has earlier suppressed it within the *collège*, confirms the reader's impression that in Mme Algazine's 'maison' she succumbs to a new determination to accede definitively to a position of domination. If, in other words, Thérèse feels tempted in the 'normal' space of the brothel simply to turn away from her 'aberrant' homoerotic union with her lover, Isabelle's reaction is to try to transform that union into a power relation in which it is she who has the upper hand, and to erode the intersubjective

equality that previously characterized it. The reader senses that her attempt to assume a position of mastery partly reflects her belief that this will aid her to reawaken Thérèse's flagging sexual attention. That she succeeds in doing so is indicated by the reference at the end of the passage to the perverse satisfaction her violence arouses in Thérèse ('La fureur d'Isabelle m'enchantait'). In spite of this, however, it is clear that the blissful self/other communion the lovers' embraces habitually allow them to achieve inside the *collège* is shattered within the 'maison de rendez-vous'.

The privileged nature of the intersubjective union Thérèse and Isabelle enjoy inside their secret erotic universe is suggested, as we saw earlier, by evocations of their capacity for mutual, non-hierarchized reflection. The disintegration, in the public/heterosexual space of the brothel, of the communion the lovers usually share is also conveyed through references to mirroring. The brothel bedroom contains a real mirror, in which Thérèse focuses first upon the ghostly reflection of the (heterosexual) couples who have used the room in the past and who now fascinate her, then upon that of the couple she and Isabelle form, and lastly upon her own, individual reflection, with which she becomes increasingly preoccupied. The description we are given of her activities before the glass strongly suggests that she is ceasing here to rely on her mirror/lover Isabelle and on their specular bond in order to derive a sense of identity, and is instead beginning to pursue a new state of subjective isolation, from which Isabelle is excluded. This, more than any other aspect of the brothel episode, is indicative of the depredations inflicted upon the lovers' homoerotic union by and within the order of 'normality' they encounter inside the 'maison':

Je tombai sur Isabelle, je déshabillai la forme des jambes, du cou-de-pied, je me vis dans la glace. La chambre était vieille, la glace me renvoyait les croupes et les caresses des couples. Je mis sa jambe dans mes bras, je la frôlai avec mon menton, ma joue, mes lèvres. Je flattais un archet, le miroir me montrait ce que je faisais, les gifles qu'elle m'avait données m'excitaient.

– Tu me fuis, dit-elle.

Je regardais dans la glace ses mains jointes sur sa toison, j'avais un plaisir de solitaire.

– Tu ne te déshabilles pas comme moi? dit Isabelle.

J'embrassais son genou, je me regardais dans le miroir, je m'aimais dans mon regard.

– Tu me négliges, dit Isabelle.

Je me séparai du miroir: le sexe des douces profondeurs. Mais le miroir m'attirait, le miroir me redemandait pour d'autres caresses solitaires. Je caressai les lèvres et la toison d'Isabelle avec son doigt. J'avais le poids du plaisir sur ma nuque.

– Qu'est-ce que tu fais?

– Dors une minute.

– Je me demande si tu m'aimes, dit Isabelle.

Je ne voulais pas lui répondre oui. (pp. 75–76)

At this stage in her tale, Thérèse, who is more obviously at a (metaphorical) 'stade du miroir' here than her counterpart in *Ravages* is at the end of that work, is abandoning identification with Isabelle in favour of an identification with her own, individual reflected image. Thérèse's embrace of isolation, which her confrontation with the mirror facilitates (the glass clearly acts in the scene as an intrusive third party, and even as a rival to Isabelle),⁴⁹ radically dislocates the relation of contiguity/intermingling she and her lover establish in their *collège*. This leads Isabelle to articulate a bitter litany of loss ('Tu me fuis [...] Tu me négliges [...] Je me demande si tu m'aimes'), which makes it evident that the privileged union she shares with Thérèse has indeed been profoundly damaged in the brothel.

The breakdown in the lovers' ability to communicate and commune with each other that is apparent in the above passage, like Thérèse's growing fascination with the 'normal' heterosexuality embodied by the couple in the next room, and Isabelle's tacit efforts to transform her bond with her lover into a (genuine) master/slave relation, derives from the fact that in the brothel the adolescents come up against, and succumb to, a set of impalpable but powerful taboos which render their lesbian relationship unworkable. These taboos, to whose overarching influence they respond intuitively rather than consciously, clearly preclude relationships which involve self/other interpenetration, departure from the social/sexual 'norm', and feminine erotic intersubjectivity. In the light of this, they may be taken to incarnate the guiding principles of the 'hom(m)osexual/social' order currently in place, in which — as Irigaray reads things, at least — the only mode of love of the same/self is that which exists in the masculine, and there is no real possibility of an (unproblematic) 'amour du même au féminin'.⁵⁰

Evidently, it is by entering the world of the social/heterosexual, through their excursion to the brothel, that Thérèse and Isabelle provoke the disintegration of the lesbian bond they create inside their *collège*. Surprisingly, once they return to their school, the lovers are able to rediscover, briefly, their damaged idyll. As the following account of their exchange of gazes in the *dortoir* implies, re-entry into their gynaeceum permits them to recuperate the self/other communion and the flow of mutual desire which eluded them in Mme Algazine's establishment:

Je cherchai sans franchise la rigole entre les seins et c'est à cause de mon regard hypocrite qu'elle croisa les revers de sa robe de chambre. Le portail entre ses yeux et les miens s'ouvrit: nous avons retrouvé la liberté d'aimer et de regarder. Mon regard me revenait comme la vague qui s'est fait mal. Je domptais les miroirs dans ses yeux, elle domptait les miroirs dans mes yeux. (p. 96)

In this brief extract, there are two kinds of 'regard' at stake. The first, the 'regard hypocrite' which Thérèse directs at Isabelle's breasts, is merely objectifying, and is rapidly banished. The second, evoked in the latter stages of the

passage, expresses desire and demand, and is transmitted by both lovers. The description we are given of this other 'regard' — which confirms Lacan's point that 'le domaine de la vision [est] intégré au champ du désir'⁵¹ — suggests that by this stage in their story, Thérèse and Isabelle have succeeded in reactivating the relation of mutuality they were forced in the brothel to abandon. Each adolescent, as Thérèse's 'Je domptais les miroirs dans ses yeux, elle domptait les miroirs dans mes yeux' indicates, is now once again in a position to send a desiring look towards her partner, to win recognition and acceptance of her desire instead of meeting blank refusal, and to re-establish lost self/other commingling ('Le portail entre ses yeux et les miens s'ouvrit: nous avons retrouvé la liberté d'aimer et de regarder'). Neither girl blocks off the desire/gaze transmitted by her lover, but appears rather to acknowledge and return it, by directing at her partner a loving look which resembles and complements that which she has previously received — hence Thérèse's observation 'Mon regard me revenait comme la vague qui s'est fait mal'. This remark of Thérèse's implies that in the 'scopic' field created by her exchange of gazes with her lover, she gains from Isabelle a desiring look which is identical to, and therefore completes, her own. This in turn suggests that she and Isabelle achieve the kind of scopio encounter which, for Lacan, can never be more than a fantasy. In the Lacanian schema, desire (of which the gaze is a vehicle) is never and can never be satisfied — which explains why he states in *Séminaire XI* that 'quand, dans l'amour, je demande un regard, ce qu'il y a de foncièrement insatisfaisant et de toujours manqué, c'est que — *jamais tu ne me regardes là où je te vois*'.⁵² However, in the realm of 'le regard' as it is imagined by Leduc, scopio complementarity clearly is possible — and contributes to the disappearance of the barriers which their visit to Mme Algazine's 'maison' erects between Thérèse and Isabelle.

In spite of the fact that Thérèse and Isabelle manage to reconstitute their homoerotic unity upon their return to the *collège*, it nevertheless collapses by the time their tale draws to a close. The ostensible cause of the demise of their union is Thérèse's mother's decision to withdraw her daughter from the school ('Le mois suivant ma mère me reprit. Je ne revis jamais Isabelle', p. 112). However, the reader senses that the disintegration of the lovers' idyllic relationship is due at a more profound level to the damage inflicted upon it by the hostile world of social and sexual 'normality' they encounter in the 'maison de rendez-vous'. Various aspects of the conclusion of *Thérèse et Isabelle* indicate that this is the case. The section of the novella following the account of the adolescents' escapade is punctuated by images conveying loss, division and death. Their inclusion suggests that the separation Thérèse and Isabelle have always dreaded is now much more likely to be realized, and has become so as a result of their trip to the brothel.⁵³ Moreover, the concluding part of the text contains a dense, lyrical passage which hints that if the lesbian bond between

the lovers deteriorates, it is because the perfect mode of self/other interaction to which it has fleetingly afforded them access cannot survive exposure to the (taints of the) 'real' world outside the protective environs of the *collège*:

Je vois le demi-deuil du nouveau jour, je vois les haillons de la nuit, je leur souris. Je souris à Isabelle et, front contre front, je joue au bélier avec elle pour oublier ce qui meurt. Le lyrisme de l'oiseau qui chante et précipite la beauté de la matinée nous épuise: la perfection n'est pas de ce monde même quand nous la rencontrons. (pp. 111–12)

It is important to recognize too that after the lovers' divisive visit to the brothel has taken place, something of the sublime aspect of their bond is indubitably adulterated, at least as far as Thérèse is concerned. She starts to experience in Isabelle's presence a sense of enclosure and restriction to which she has not previously been susceptible, and which resembles that felt by her namesake in parts one and two of *Ravages* when she is with her mother(s):

Isabelle agenouillée sur l'oreiller tremblait comme je tremblais. Que mon visage en feu, que ma bouche étaient séparés de son visage, de sa bouche! Ma sueur, ma salive, le manque d'espace, ma condition de galérienne condamnée à jouir sans trêve depuis que je l'aimais m'envoûtaient. (p. 111)

Thérèse also manifests a nascent desire, which she never articulates explicitly, to 'kill off' Isabelle even as she somehow preserves and fetichizes her, a desire that is suggested by her telling observation 'J'embaumai Isabelle avec mes lèvres, avec mes mains' (pp. 108–09). That Thérèse comes in the concluding section of the text to perceive herself as a 'galérienne' and to wish, however unconsciously, to bring her bond with her lover to a close through a symbolic act of immolation is highly significant. This indicates that, in her eyes at least, her formerly ideal relationship with Isabelle is beginning to admit the kind of defects that characterize the (imperfect) maternal/filial bond portrayed in *Ravages*, and further confirms the reader's impression that even though the adolescents' idyll is revived once they re-enter the *collège*, the brothel episode inflicts profound and irremediable damage upon it.

The relationship between *Thérèse et Isabelle* and *Ravages* is one of contrast. The basic focus of each work is more or less identical, since both deal with a powerful feminine tie and with the equally powerful forces that undermine it. In *Ravages*, the union between the novel's heroine and her mother(s) is shown to be so fraught with conflict that Marc's 'œdipal' destruction of it appears, at least initially, to be beneficial to Thérèse. On the other hand, certain, apparently defunct aspects of the mother/daughter bond portrayed in the novel seem to be revived at its conclusion, and the *renouement* between Thérèse and her mother is presented positively, so that the work finishes on a note of optimism. In *Thérèse et Isabelle*, the homoerotic relation between the adolescent heroines of the novella, since it escapes the problems inherent in the mother/daughter

bond, is idealized in a way that the mother/daughter union depicted in *Ravages* is not — yet, unlike that union, it succumbs to the abstract but profoundly noxious forces which are unleashed against it and which detach Thérèse from Isabelle. In other words, even though it celebrates feminine same-sex bonding much more forcefully and consistently than *Ravages* does, *Thérèse et Isabelle* must in the last analysis be viewed as a less buoyant work than its predecessor. If *Ravages* tells the tale of the (unexpected) recuperation of a (pre-œdipal) mother/daughter idyll, *Thérèse et Isabelle* chronicles, in part, the process through which a feminine union that borders on the paradisiacal deteriorates and comes to grief. Our sense of the quasi-tragic dimension of the novella is intensified by the fact that the breakdown of Thérèse's idyll with Isabelle, the inevitability of which she articulates to herself during an early encounter with her lover, is tacitly likened to the Fall:

– Parlez.

– Non.

La statue entrera dans le mur, elle sera absorbée par le mur.

– Vous me quittez?

– Moi aussi j'attends, dit-elle.

Plénitude ronde du “non” dit à voix basse, beauté serrée de la boule de neige au mois de mai que je négligerai quand je commencerai de mourir loin des jardins. (p. 13)

At various points throughout this chapter, I have described *Thérèse et Isabelle* as a ‘utopian’ text, and the pessimism of its conclusion does not detract from the utopian quality of the account of female intersubjectivity it offers. What are we to make of the visionary character of Leduc's novella? As Margaret Whitford argues, the weaving of utopian visions does not necessarily signify an effort on the part of their author to offer blueprints for an ideal future. The creation of such visions can represent, more realistically, an attempt at the production of a shift in consciousness, a shift which might, for instance, engender a reconsideration of what women's status is, and should be, *vis-à-vis* each other (and the other sex).⁵⁴ It would be absurd to suggest that, in writing *Thérèse et Isabelle*, Violette Leduc consciously sought to provoke a change in thinking about the possibilities and difficulties pertaining to female intersubjective interaction. The historical moment at which she was writing and her inevitable lack of familiarity with the complex issues addressed by contemporary feminist theorists such as Irigaray mean that she could not possibly have been pursuing such a goal. However, her imagining of a lesbian utopia and her account of the disintegration of that utopia in the world of the ‘normal’ cannot fail to cause today's readers to reflect upon what Irigaray suggests to be a key issue of our time — the current lack of a ‘space’ in which the female subject might situate herself healthily in relation to other women.

Until now, my discussion has focused exclusively on the account the reader is given in *L'Asphyxie*, *Ravages* and *Thérèse et Isabelle* of the complexities of feminine bonding and interaction. In the next and final chapter of this study, the nature, and 'gender', of the language contained in *Thérèse et Isabelle* will be explored, in an attempt to establish whether Leduc wrote about the (almost) perfect feminine relationship which exists between the adolescent lesbian heroines of her text in a discourse that was also 'feminine'.

NOTES

1. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, p. 125.
2. Cixous thus describes an 'ideal' form of lesbianism, which 'has nothing to do with heterosexuality, and which leaves no room for man such as he is' (Cixous, 'Rethinking Differences', in George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (eds), *Homosexualities and French Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 70–86 (p. 75)).
3. Our sense of the 'marital' character of Thérèse's bond with Cécile is reinforced by the parallels set up in *Ravages* between the Thérèse/Cécile and Thérèse/Marc relationships. Each lover rejects Thérèse's hand, Marc on p. 140 ("Faut pas me découvrir ainsi, p'tit." Il m'avait refusé sa main'), and Cécile on p. 145 ('Cécile voulait bien de ma main, mais elle ne la serrait pas entre les siennes') and p. 148 ('Cécile bailla sur son poignet. "Lâche ma main", dit-elle'). Both repudiate the possessive gazes Thérèse directs at them ('Cécile voyait comment je la regardais. [...] Cécile soupira; elle baissa les yeux', p. 153, '[Le] visage [de Marc] redevenait méchant. "Tu t'accuseras à un autre moment. Et ces yeux suppliants, et ce regard malheureux que je rencontre partout!"', p. 240). Both refuse the gifts she offers when they are abandoning her (pp. 180, 255), and try to oblige her to give up the 'valises' in which she carries the goods she sells and which denote her professional and, on a symbolic level, her sexual independence (pp. 62, 110, 111).
4. Esther Newton, 'The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman', *Signs*, 9 (1984), 557–75 (p. 558). Newton argues that during the period when women like Hall were writing, the association of lesbianism and masculinity (which Hall upheld) was not only unavoidable but also politically expedient, and should not be condemned out of hand, even though it endorses patriarchal gender categories.
5. The reader's awareness of Cécile's mannishness is reinforced by her rather obviously 'male' use of various symbolic objects associated elsewhere in *Ravages* with Marc, masculinity and the penis/phallus:

Cécile emmaillota le morceau de glace dans le fichu:
"Cigarette?"
Elle avait l'air de me faire des avances. (p. 78)

– Son gâteau va brûler!
Cécile partit. Elle ouvrait le four, elle enfonçait, elle ressortait, intact, le couteau dans mon cœur. (p. 145)

Maintenant Cécile palpa le briquet à l'intérieur de sa poche. (p. 178)
6. Sigmund Freud, 'The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman', *SE*, 18, pp. 147–72. In this essay he suggests that the object choice of a female homosexual is determined by masculine/virile drives, and that the (active) lesbian is therefore a man *manqué*. His description of the psychosexual development of the young lesbian whose analysis forms the basis of his essay contains the remarkable observation that, after an unconscious sexual disappointment during puberty, his patient 'changed into a man and took her mother in place of her father as the object of her love' (p. 158). Freud's account of this case of feminine homosexuality is at least partially responsible for the widely held belief that in lesbian relationships, one partner is always a pseudo-male, while the other is womanly, a passive 'wife'. This vision of lesbian relations also derives from the writings of nineteenth-century sexologists, notably Krafft-Ebing.
7. Cixous, *op. cit.*, pp. 74–75.
8. Kristeva, *Histoires d'amour* (Paris: Denoël, 1983), p. 81.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
10. *Ibid.*

11. Ibid., p. 81.
12. Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
13. Charles-Merrien, *op. cit.*, p. 197.
14. 'La rose est bien le symbole de la verge, comme en témoigne cette comparaison prise dans *L'Affamée* à propos de deux trapézistes au music-hall: "Je suis un dénicheur et un redresseur de sexe. Je commence mon numéro. Ma main s'envole. Elle monte jusqu'aux cintres, elle redescend. Elle va au but. Elle est entre les jambes de l'acrobate. Elle réfute des accessoires minables en pleine lumière. Elle les veut plus apparents que la rose des liseuses en cuir repoussé." (*L'Affamée*, Edition Folio, p. 173) [Leduc] adoptera également cette image à propos de Marc qui se refuse et s'éloigne d'elle "sans lui laisser la rose dont la fraîcheur se serait déroulée jusqu'à ses pieds." (*Ravages*, Folio, p. 329).' Ibid., p. 217.
15. Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
16. Irigaray, *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, p. 125. According to Irigaray, in the phallogocentric/patriarchal cultural order, as articulated by Freud, it is extremely hard to 'think' (as Leduc seems to do in *Thérèse et Isabelle*), and therefore to practise, a feminine homosexuality which does not mime heterosexuality. This is not to say that such a homosexuality — i.e. one which engenders a genuinely feminine geography of female relations and consequently permits the realization of women's desire for other women — cannot exist:

Que la femme puisse désirer une "même" qu'elle, quelqu'une du "même" sexe, qu'elle puisse elle aussi avoir des appétits d'auto- ou d'homosexualité, cela ne peut se comprendre, et semble d'ailleurs inadmissible. Cela, en fait, se rencontre rarement dans cette histoire, phallogocentrique, où la valeur est réservée au pénis ou à ses équivalents. Et où il n'est pas facile d'être hors système, hors "commerce". La revendication d'homosexualité féminine ne suffisant évidemment pas à mettre en cause le privilège du phallus.

Ce qui ne signifie pas que le désir de la femme pour elle-même, pour le même — pour la même, une même — ne soit pas à reconnaître. N'ait pas à trouver, ou retrouver, une économie possible (*Speculum*, pp. 125–26).
17. Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
18. Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 133, 136.
19. Irigaray, *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, p. 127. The 'other' *jouissance*, or sexual pleasure, to which Irigaray refers is one which she posits as specific to women who succeed in eluding enclosure within a heterosexual model of eroticism. It is a 'plaisir sexuel spécifique', a 'jouissance différente, complémentaire ou supplémentaire, de celle recherchée dans l'hétérosexualité' (Ibid.).
20. Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, pp. 27–28. It is as a result of comments like this that Irigaray has been accused, by materialist feminists, of adopting an 'essentialist' position, which reduces women to a set of anatomical, and worse still, natural characteristics and fails (apparently) to take on board the key argument proffered by the materialist camp, which is 'that "nature" is always a product of social relations and that sex is always a construction of oppression' (Fuss, *op. cit.*, p. 57). It is certainly possible to read Irigaray's observations regarding the female body/pleasure as essentialist, but we must bear in mind that Irigarayan essentialism is strategic rather than naïve or apolitical. In her essay 'Luce Irigaray's Language of Essence', Diana Fuss explains this argument as follows: 'The point, for Irigaray, of defining women from an essentialist standpoint is not to imprison women in their bodies but to rescue them from enculturating definitions by men. An essentialist definition of "woman" implies that there will always be some part of "woman" which resists masculine imprinting and socialization' (Ibid., p. 61).
21. *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p. 23.
22. Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
23. Georges Bataille, 'L'Érotisme', in *Œuvres complètes X* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp. 11–270 (pp. 17–19).
24. Ibid., pp. 22–23.
25. 'Dans le mouvement de dissolution des êtres, le partenaire masculin a en principe un rôle actif, la partie féminine est passive. C'est essentiellement la partie passive féminine qui est dissoute en tant qu'être constitué' (Ibid., p. 23).
26. This capacity is suggested by the way in which each lover is shown to be a double/mirror-self of the other:

Je me perdais dans le doigt d'Isabelle comme elle se perdait dans le mien. (p. 32)

Elle s'arrêtait quand je m'arrêtais, elle repartait quand je repartais. (p. 41)

J'accourus dans ses bras comme elle accourut dans les miens. (p. 48)

Our impression that each adolescent functions as her lover's mirror/reflection is intensified by the fact that the words they utter are frequently identical:

- C'est vrai?
 - C'est vrai, dit Isabelle. (p. 11)
 - Je ne peux plus.
 - Je ne peux plus. (p. 17)
 - Besoin de toi, dis-je.
 - Besoin de toi, dit Isabelle. (p. 25)
 - Ne te tais pas, dit Isabelle.
 - Je ne me tais pas. Je te porte. (p. 108)
27. Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p. 215.
 28. Anika Rifflet-Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (Brussels: Dessart, 1970), p. 145. An imaginary relationship, for Lacan, is a dyadic bond based upon an identification of the self and another being/image. The first imaginary union exists in the pre-œdipal period, between a child and its mother. Even after this is shattered by the father's intervention, the human individual's desire to form imaginary bonds is not banished. The bond between the infant and its reflection, during the Mirror Stage, belongs also to the domain of the Imaginary.
 29. In Lacanian terms, imaginary relations preclude subjectivity and individuality because they are predicated upon a 'rapport érotique où l'individu humain se fixe à une image qui l'aliène à lui-même' (Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 113). Imaginary bonds expose the subject to 'a capture of the moi by another, in an aggressive or erotic relationship' (Anthony Wilden, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p. 175). The relationship between Thérèse and Isabelle, however, even though it is a specular 'relation duelle immédiate' (Lemaire, op. cit., p. 145) and may be deemed imaginary, does not, in the account Thérèse gives of it, impose alienation and loss of subjectivity.
 30. Significantly, in French erotic discourse fields are commonly associated with the female genitals, and, more generally, with woman's body: 'L'assimilation du vagin à un champ [...] labouré, ensemencé, etc., constitue une image fondamentale et qui revient sous mille formes' (Guiraud, op. cit., p. 213).
 31. According to C. J. Rawson, the cannibalistic nature of erotic activity, which is suggested strongly in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, is frequently a theme in literary works depicting same-sex relationships: 'Some of the most intensely elaborated treatments of sexual cannibalism occur, as it happens, in homosexual literature: in Genet's *Pompes funèbres* and Monique Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*. Connections suggested by psychoanalytic writings between homosexuality and the "cannibal" or oral phase may have something to do with this, whether because they are true or because post-Freudian writers have believed them to be' ('Cannibalism and Fiction', *Genre*, 2 (1978), 227-313 (p. 270)).
 32. It is partially validated, as Colette Hall points out, by the fact that when Thérèse reflects upon her mother's marital defection, she implies (but only implies) that the union she has formed with Isabelle constitutes an attempt to 'combl[er] le vide laissé par la désertion de sa mère' by establishing a rival 'mother/daughter' bond with her lesbian partner (*Les Mères chez les romancières du XXe siècle*, p. 230): 'Sur terre il n'y a que toi, sur terre je n'aime que toi, me dit [ma mère], mais elle a quelqu'un. J'ai rencontré Isabelle, j'ai quelqu'un. Je suis à Isabelle, je n'appartiens plus à ma mère' (*Thérèse et Isabelle*, p. 21).
 33. Carolyn Burke, 'Irigaray through the Looking Glass', *Feminist Studies*, 7 (1981), 288-306 (p. 299).
 34. Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, p. 133.
 35. My understanding of the Irigarayan 'female homosexual economy' is indebted to Margaret Whitford's *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) and *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991). Whitford consistently relates the idea of such an economy to an order of 'women-among-themselves, love of the self on the side of women' (Whitford, *Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 104).
 36. Irigaray, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*, p. 100.
 37. Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p. 167.
 38. 'Il faut qu'un symbolisme soit créé entre femmes pour que l'amour entre elles puisse avoir lieu. Cet amour n'est d'ailleurs possible dès maintenant qu'entre femmes qui peuvent se parler. Sans cet intervalle d'échange ou de paroles, ou de gestes, les passions entre femmes s'exercent sur un mode [...] assez cruel.' (*Ethique*, p. 103).

'Women cannot speak to each other of their affects in the existing verbal code, and they cannot even imagine them in the ruling systems of representation. Love and desire between women and in women are still without signifiers that can be articulated in language. The result is paralysis, somatization, non-differentiation between one woman and another, enforced rejection or hatred [...]'. ('The Poverty of Psychoanalysis', in *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 101).

39. Margaret Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 72.

40. *Ethique*, p. 106.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

42. For a helpful account of why and how Irigaray feels the Symbolic (and the imaginary subtending it) must be changed, see Whitford, *Philosophy in the Feminine*, chapter 4 ('Maternal Genealogy and the Symbolic').

43. Irigaray, *Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère* (Montreal: Editions de la pleine lune, 1981), p. 86.

44. See Whitford, *Philosophy in the Feminine*, chapter 8 ('Women and/in the Social Contract').

45. Stockinger, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

46. This association is apparent, for example, in an early account of the intense pleasure their embraces allow the lovers to enjoy:

Nous avions effleuré et survolé nos épaules avec les doigts fauves de l'automne, nous avons lancé à grands traits la lumière dans les nids, nous avons éventé les caresses, nous avons créé des motifs avec de la brise marine, nous avons enveloppé de zéphyrs nos jambes [...] Quels mariages de mouvements! Des nuages nous aidèrent. Nous étions ruisselantes de lumière.

La vague vint en éclaircur, elle grisa nos pieds, elle se reprit. Des lianes se détendirent, une clarté se propagea dans nos chevilles. (*Ibid.*, pp. 31–32).

47. Charles-Merrien points out that in the brothel/voyeur scene in *La Bâtarde*, there is a hint that the voyeur is impotent, and that '[la] présence du voyeur stimule le désir de Violette, sans doute parce que sa relation avec Hermine est en partie fondée sur le sado-masochisme, mais surtout parce qu'elle détient une virilité dont cet homme est dépourvu' (*op. cit.*, p. 114).

48. Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p. 26. I shall return to the notion of the phallomorphic in chapter 4.

49. Charles-Merrien also comments on this aspect of the scene, but interprets the role played by the mirror somewhat differently. In her version of the Thérèse/Isabelle/mirror incident, the glass represents not only a 'tierce personne assistant au rite amoureux des deux amantes' but also a 'témoin impérieux' whose presence Thérèse actively welcomes because it enables her to display her 'capacité de faire jouir une femme' and sets up a 'jeu triangulaire [qui] décuple son plaisir' (*op. cit.*, p. 112). Charles-Merrien, in other words, perceives the mirror as a kind of benign voyeur, placed in a relationship of contrast to the (real? imaginary?) voyeur Thérèse intuitively behind the *œil de bœuf*.

50. Irigaray's theorization of why, as things stand, love of the same/self can exist in the masculine but not in the feminine may be summarized as follows. As Whitford explains, patriarchy — as defined by Irigaray — is 'hom(m)osexual', because it represents 'the realm of the same, i.e. of one sex' and 'does not recognize sexual difference' (*The Irigaray Reader*, p. 18). Under the patriarchal system (of which Leduc's brothel is an exemplary element) only the father/son genealogy is recognized, and only the male subject has therefore the means to accede to love of the same — the whole point about a genealogy being that it allows relations of the same/self to obtain, because it mediates them. Irigaray argues, moreover, that 'l'amour du même entre hommes [...] ne peut se poser comme tel sans le maternel–naturel–matériel' (*Ethique*, p. 100). What she means here is that love of the same in the masculine is defined against, and constructed upon, the maternal–feminine — which represents a mere substratum or 'sous-sol' (*ibid.*, p. 101) that enables male self/same love and the paternal genealogy to exist. In Irigarayan terms therefore, it is because women a) are excluded from the domain of 'love of the same' by its (inevitable) androcentrism and b) constitute the very foundations of that domain that they cannot themselves achieve an 'amour du même au féminin'.

51. Lacan, *Les Quatre Concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse: Le Séminaire XI*, p. 80. According to Elizabeth Wright, 'Lacan identifies a "scopic drive" for this lodging of desire in looking [...]. Freud was aware of such a drive, but stressed mainly its perverse aspects, whereas Lacan extends it to every act of seeing. The eyes, as one of the modes of access for libido to explore the world, become the instruments of this drive' (Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 117).

52. Lacan, *Les Quatre Concepts*, pp. 94–95.

53. 'La nuit refroidissait nos lèvres jointes. [...] Le temps venait et passait avec ses foulards de crêpe.' (p. 96)

'Nous avons entendu le claquement du vent dans le suaire d'un arbre.' (p. 97)

'Nous nous sommes séparées, nous nous sommes attendues, nous avons eu la crevasse de l'effroi entre nous.' (p. 99)

'J'embaumai Isabelle avec mes lèvres, avec mes mains.' (pp. 108-09)

'Le jour prenait la nuit, le jour effaçait nos mariages [. . .]' (p. 110)

54. See Whitford, *Philosophy in the Feminine*, chapter 1 ('Feminism and Utopia').