

CHAPTER 4

WRITING THE FEMININE?

Since the last war, linguistic matters have been of major concern to intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic; so much so, in fact, that 'it is as though the mid-twentieth-century awareness projects onto language issues which previously were theorised around God'.¹ Given the overarching importance which has been accorded to language in the post-war period, it is unsurprising that it should have become an area of feminist debate. The issue of woman's relationship to language has come under increasing scrutiny, particularly in recent years, and has led feminist writers and scholars to suggest that the words we speak and write are tainted by the patriarchal order which predominates within Western culture and, in consequence, alienate or 'exclude' the female subject who uses them.

In this final chapter, my aim is to investigate the ways in which Violette Leduc views and uses language. Any such investigation clearly necessitates some initial exploration of contemporary analyses of the nature and significance of the linguistic order, and of feminist accounts of the problems of language women encounter. My introductory discussion will focus on the work of French feminist theorists, who have been trained in the speculative disciplines of philosophy and psychoanalysis, rather than on that of Anglo-American women scholars. The theoretical discourses of the former group were published in the decade following Leduc's death and clearly came into being within a conceptual/political/cultural context she would have found quite alien. None the less, because they focus on concerns which are also in evidence in comments Leduc made regarding the nature of writing and in her own texts, it is productive to use them as a point of departure from which to explore her work.

Since the 1970s, French feminists have vigorously denounced what Irigaray has termed 'la sexuation du discours'² and have suggested that language is a patriarchal preserve which does not allow for the articulation of sexual difference. Radical French feminist theorists have argued that the linguistic sphere is not neutral but rather 'gendered', that its apparent universality masks a masculine bias, and that it constitutes a domain of masculine privilege in which woman cannot easily find a place or voice. That they should claim this to be the case highlights the debt they owe, however grudgingly, to the psychoanalytic writings of Jacques Lacan.

According to Lacan, the function of the symbolic order — the order of language — is a deterministic one. Lacan writes that each of us is a 'sujet dans le verbe', an individual who is subject *to* language as much as the subject of it, who enters, and is 'produced' by, the linguistic sphere.³ There is moreover, in the Lacanian schema, an indissoluble bond between language and the phallus. This is because, for Lacan, our transition into the symbolic only occurs once we submit unconsciously to 'castration', which, in Lacanian terms, entails acceptance of the Father's Law and of a resultant rupture of our primordial bond with our maternal parent. As Jacqueline Rose explains, 'in Lacan's account, the phallus stands for that moment of rupture. It refers mother and child to the dimension of the symbolic which is figured by the father's place'.⁴ What Lacan suggests, then, is that accession to language is dependent upon a repression of the original relation of desire that binds us to the mother, that this repression is imposed by the Father (here a function or 'code', incarnating an interdictory law, rather than a real and specific individual), and that the symbolic, linguistic system we enter when we effect it has as its central signifier the phallus, which is the symbol both of lack (i.e. of the mother) and of paternal omnipotence.⁵

Lacan's positioning of the phallus not only as the spur to language acquisition but also as the (transcendental) signifier which dominates the symbolic leads him to make telling observation about the relationship between women (who, unlike men, do not possess the fleshly or imaginary equivalent of the phallus, the penis) and language. In a characteristically hermetic passage, he comments:

Il n'y a de femme qu'exclue par la nature des choses qui est la nature des mots, et il faut bien dire que s'il y a quelque chose dont elles-mêmes se plaignent assez pour l'instant, c'est bien de ça — simplement, elles ne savent pas ce qu'elles disent, c'est toute la différence entre elles et moi.⁶

What Lacan seems to be saying is that women and men do not have the same relationship to the realm of words (which, for Lacan, is that of all reality) and that language is uniquely problematic for women. His argument — which we are of course by no means obliged to accept — has been taken to suggest that in a signifying system in which woman is 'cast in the position of other', the female subject 'is both excluded from and elevated *beyond* language'.⁷ A different way of putting the same point is that feminine difference cannot be adequately defined (or represented) within an all-embracing linguistic order that is intrinsically phallogocentric, i.e. within a 'Discours qui rejette comme irrecevable — inconcevable — toute articulation d'un "je" avec un corps-sexe féminin'.⁸ Lacan's remarks about feminine exclusion suggest that, as far as he is concerned, the feminine is — and will remain — unconceptualizable and unspoken in language, and that there is nothing to be done about this sorry state of affairs. It is for this reason, conceivably, that he describes the 'la' of 'la femme' as 'un signifiant dont le propre est qu'il ne peut rien signifier'.⁹ French feminists who

have worked on the relationship between femininity and language follow Lacan up to a point, in that they too believe that the discursive realm (as it stands, at least) privileges the phallus as transcendental signifier, and precludes symbolic self-definition by/for women. Unlike Lacan, however, neither Luce Irigaray nor H  l  ne Cixous considers the obfuscation of the feminine by the symbolic order to be irremediable, and each has produced texts which indicate that there may be (specifically feminine) linguistic practices that might allow its articulation.

For Irigaray, transforming the symbolic in such a way that the inscription of feminine difference might be made possible is imperative. She points out that her own *  uvre* derives directly from her need to achieve this goal: 'Je suis une femme. Je suis un   tre sexu   f  minin. Le motif de mon travail se trouve dans l'impossibilit   d'articuler un tel   nonc  ; dans le fait que sa production est de quelque fa  on insens  e, inconvenante, ind  cente'.¹⁰ The change she envisages can only come into being through a radical, transformational 'travail du langage', whose function would be to '*d  sancre le phallocentrisme, le phallogratisme, pour rendre le masculin    son langage, laissant la possibilit   d'un langage autre*'.¹¹ The linguistic subversion she has in mind works on two levels. It involves not only an assault upon existing codes of representation but also a modification of the structural/stylistic features of discourse which, in her view, are symptomatic of its phallogratism. As far as representation is concerned, Irigaray suggests that women should, in order to reveal and even remedy the occlusion of the feminine within language, play with those images of femininity it commonly offers us in such a way that their demeaning, 'masculine' character is highlighted. She describes the ludic activity she recommends as 'mimetic':

Jouer de la mim  sis, c'est [. . .], pour une femme, tenter de retrouver le lieu de son exploitation par le discours, sans s'y laisser simplement r  duire. C'est se resoumettre — en tant que du c  t   du "sensible", de la "mat  re" . . . —    des "id  es", notamment d'elle,   labor  es dans/par une logique masculine, mais pour faire "appara  tre", par un effet de r  p  tition ludique, ce qui devait rester occult  : le recouvrement d'une op  ration du f  minin dans le langage.¹²

The parodic strategy to which Irigaray refers permits, in her view, the demolition of representations of womanhood which are accepted as universally true but which are projections of the male imagination, representations that constitute '[des] images d'Epinal — versions d  form  es, mutil  es de notre histoire individuelle et collective [. . .] qui sont inscrites partout    l'ext  rieur sous nos yeux'.¹³ She does not suggest, however, that mimesis constitutes the only means by which the phallogratism of the symbolic can be illuminated and (perhaps) undermined. In various texts and interviews, she argues that it is primarily the creation of a new kind of writing *practice* that enables women to undo the masculinization of discourse. For Irigaray, it is above all the fact that the language of Western culture, particularly philosophico-rational language,

privileges stable, single, unambivalent significations and is intrinsically teleological which makes it 'phallographic', i.e. (symbolically) marked by a masculine 'logic' or 'imaginary'. Irigaray's point here, as Diana Fuss explains, rests upon her 'strategic misreading of male genitalia' as always and inflexibly unified/'monolithic'/singular, a misreading which is destined to expose the erection, by Lacan amongst others, of 'the phallus as a single transcendental signifier'.¹⁴ What Irigaray is suggesting is that all forms of discourse which valorize 'le *un* de la forme, de l'individu, du sexe, du nom propre, du sens propre'¹⁵ and foreground principles 'based upon the possibility of individuating or distinguishing one thing from another' (e.g. those of identity, non-contradiction and binarism)¹⁶ present 'a certain isomorphism with the masculine sex'.¹⁷ A 'langage autre', which would not efface sexual difference and might admit/symbolize the feminine, must therefore, in Irigaray's opinion, be one whose style allows fixed, single meanings to be subverted, i.e. one that is characterized by ambivalence and indeterminacy:

Ce "style" ou "écriture" de la femme met plutôt feu aux mots fétiches, aux termes propres, aux formes bien construites. [...] Son style résiste à, et fait exploser, toute forme, figure, idée, concept solidement établis. Ce qui n'est pas dire que son style n'est rien, comme le laisse croire une discursivité qui ne peut le penser. Mais son "style" ne peut se soutenir comme thèse, ne peut faire l'objet d'une position.¹⁸

There will always [...] be a plurality in feminine language. And it will not even be the Freudian 'pun' i.e., a superimposed hierarchy of meaning, but the fact that at each moment there is always for women, 'at least two' meanings, without one being able to decide which meaning prevails, which is 'on top' or 'underneath', which 'conscious' or 'repressed'. [...] A feminine language would undo the unique meaning of words, of nouns: which still regulates all discourse.¹⁹

[A feminine language] has nothing to do with the syntax which we have used for centuries, namely, that constructed according to the following organization: subject, predicate, or; subject, verb, object. For female sexuality is not unifiable, it cannot be subsumed under the concept of subject. Which brings into question all the syntactical norms. . .²⁰

The plurivocal language Irigaray envisions is obviously the antithesis of the 'monolithic'/rational, and can justifiably be described as poetic. In addition, such language is, for Irigaray, 'vulvomorphic', because its plurality and fluidity stand in (a metaphorical) relation to the non-unified form of woman's genitalia, to the decentred nature of her pleasure, and to the process of endless touching and separation which Irigaray associates with the two lips of the vagina ('La femme "se touche" tout le temps, sans qu'on puisse d'ailleurs le lui interdire, car son sexe est fait de deux lèvres qui s'embrassent continûment').²¹ The 'parler femme'²² she envisages might be taken, then, to constitute 'an unalienated language transparently expressing the real, a *parole* analogous to the female body, that would speak the female body directly'²³ — were it not for the

fact that, as Jane Gallop points out, 'Irigaray's vulvomorphologic logic is not predestined by anatomy but is already a *symbolic* interpretation of that anatomy',²⁴ and forms part of her 'attempt to define the characteristics of what a differently sexualized language would be':²⁵

C'est que dans ses dires aussi — du moins quand elle l'ose — la femme se re-touche tout le temps. Elle s'écarte à peine d'elle-même d'un babillage, d'une exclamation, d'une demi-confiance, d'une phrase laissée en suspens . . . Quand elle y revient, c'est pour repartir ailleurs. D'un autre point de plaisir, ou de douleur. Il faudrait l'écouter d'une autre oreille comme un "*autre sens*" toujours en train de se tisser, de s'embrasser avec les mots, mais aussi de s'en défaire pour ne pas s'y fixer. S'y figer.²⁶

In her explorations of language, Cixous too suggests that it is the creation of multivalent discourse which permits the articulation of the feminine within the symbolic. On the one hand, she argues that the kind of language she has in mind — an excessive, disruptive language that no longer represses feminine otherness and is consequently 'bisexual' — need not be equated with women or female writers.²⁷ Yet she also contends that it is in fact women who are more likely to produce the form of discourse in question ('Je dirai: aujourd'hui l'écriture est aux femmes. Cela n'est pas une provocation, cela signifie que la femme admet qu'il y ait de l'autre. Elle n'a pas effacé, dans son devenir-femme la bisexualité latente chez la fille comme chez le garçon. Féminité et bisexualité vont ensemble')²⁸ and implies, more overtly than Irigaray, that it represents a language of the female body/libido:

Il faut que la femme écrive son corps, qu'elle invente la langue imprenable qui crève les cloisonnements, classes et rhétoriques, ordonnances et codes, qu'elle submerge, transperce, franchisse le discours [. . .].²⁹

Le corps de la femme aux mille et un foyers d'ardeurs, quand elle le laissera — fracassant les jougs et censures — articuler le foisonnement des significations qui en tous sens le parcourt, c'est de bien plus d'une langue qu'il va faire retentir la vieille langue maternelle à un seul sillon.³⁰

Both Irigaray and Cixous privilege forms of language which are characterized by polyvalence, indeterminacy and ambiguity and, furthermore, relate these forms (however metaphorically) to the polymorphous nature of the female body and woman's libidinal organization. Although compelling, the theories of these radical feminists present certain difficulties. They invite accusations of essentialism and biologism, because they seem to indicate that 'non-phallic' (i.e. subversive and experimental) language directly echoes female sexuality and anatomy.³¹ In addition, they set up an (implicit) association between 'feminine' language and the anti-rational which, given the assumptions mainstream patriarchal culture makes about women and the (irrational) discourses they produce, is clearly problematic. They threaten, moreover, to engender a kind of critical ghetto in which women and their language/texts risk becoming enclosed. None the less, the writings of Cixous and Irigaray are in many

respects of enormous use to women authors and feminist critics. Above all, they help us to realize that women may well need to write 'differently' in order to represent their femininity — even if we do not accept the particular accounts they offer us of what 'speaking (as a) woman' involves.

In earlier chapters I have concentrated on an analysis of Leduc's exploration of feminine interaction and bonding. Yet she was also preoccupied by the problem of *language* and by the question of the (woman) writer's relationship with it. In the second volume of her autobiography, *La Folie en tête*, written in 1970, Leduc indicates that she experienced the process of literary creation as a struggle with language, which typically took the form of a dogged but often disappointing search for an ideal *mot juste*:

Mon idéal? L'honnêteté d'un cordonnier. Je serre les dents, je cerne une antenne de télévision, une cheminée chapeautée, ce sont mes profondeurs. Je débloque une sensation, une comparaison. Il fait jour, c'est ma nuit. J'ai une croix, je ne la fuis pas lorsque je cherche le mot juste. Mon espoir d'atteindre le but est aussi mon précipice. (p. 52)

J'écrivais, soudain plus rien. Quarante jours de sécheresse se déclaraient en une seconde dans mon désert. Le vocabulaire se retirait. Quoi faire? Comment définir le bleu, ma couleur préférée, comment définir le bleu des yeux d'un chat siamois? Mon coude sur la table, je fermais les yeux, je serrais mes dents, je distendais mes lèvres, je plissais mes paupières, je me creusais pour être visitée. [...] L'adjectif ne répond pas à ma prière, il faut poser le porte-plume sur la table. . . . Je me retrouve les yeux fermés, paupières plissées, bras tendus; pitié! J'ai besoin d'un adjectif. (pp. 116–17)

Leduc also indicates in *La Folie en tête* that her perception of language as an obstacle became acute when she was writing the first version of what was to appear, eventually and much modified, as *Thérèse et Isabelle* (i.e. when she was working on the section of text which Gallimard refused to publish with the rest of *Ravages* in 1955). In other words, it was the experience of writing about feminine, and more specifically lesbian, eroticism in the 1950s which, according to her later autobiographical text, seems to have forced her to confront the restrictions inherent in language. In *La Folie en tête*, Leduc re-creates the feelings of despair that assailed her as she grappled with words which seemed to isolate her from the sexual sensations she longed to communicate. These sensations were as much her own as those of the aroused adolescents she depicted, since she resorted to masturbation in an attempt to infuse her writing with the erotic reality she was attempting to re-create:

C'est une fugitive, cette sensation, je ne peux pas l'arrêter au passage. (p. 297)

Je leur suis fidèle, je leur obéis: je m'aime. Mon sexe? Pour ne pas *trahir* Thérèse et Isabelle. Exploitation répugnante. Tu vendrais ton sexe à ton porte-plume? Je vendrais tout pour une plus grande exactitude. Tu te vois d'ici pendant que tu écriras? Je vois le résultat: un mot juste, un seul, et je me foutrai de l'opprobre et du péché. (p. 298, my emphasis)

Comment décrire la sensation? Comment *fixer* la sensation? Je n'y parviendrai pas. Je m'aimerai, je m'aimerai pour plus de sincérité. Je serai Thérèse, je serai Isabelle. Il le faut, je me suis engagée avec mon cahier. (pp. 317–18, my emphasis)

J'écrivais, j'écrivais sous leur dictée. J'écrivais d'une main et de l'autre... je m'aimais pour les aimer, pour les retrouver, pour les *traduire*, pour ne pas les *trahir*. (p. 321, my emphasis)

The above extracts convey Leduc's sense of creative failure, and also suggest the extent to which she perceived the creation of erotic discourse as a (pleasurably) transgressive act ('un mot juste, un seul, et je me foutrai de l'opprobre et du péché'). More importantly, however, they indicate the degree to which she distrusted language and found it wanting. Leduc's awareness of linguistic inadequacy also emerges, more clearly, in a conversation she creates in an early part of the 1966 version of *Thérèse et Isabelle*:

Nous parlons. C'est dommage. Ce qui a été dit a été assassiné. Nos paroles, qui ne grandiront pas, qui n'embelliront pas, se faneront à l'intérieur de nos os.

J'ai plongé dans ses yeux.

– Je vous...

Les paroles flétriront les sentiments.

J'ai mis ma main sur sa bouche. Isabelle voulait me le dire.

– Je vous...

Je l'étouffais pendant qu'elle voulait avouer. (pp. 11–12)

In the light of the above, we can assume that possibly from the mid-fifties and certainly by the mid-sixties, Leduc had come to view language as a problematic medium against which the writer (and speaker) must struggle in order to 'fix' or 'translate' aspects of reality — particularly that of feminine erotic sensation.³² What concerns me here is the *nature* of the restriction Leduc perceived language to represent, the form taken by her combat against linguistic inadequacy, and the textual solutions she attempted to evolve. Did she, for example, having discerned the 'masculinity' of the linguistic order, seek to write about feminine interaction in a discourse which was itself in some way or other 'feminine'? Or did her problems with language derive from a conviction that the words available to the writer who tries to 'translate' private, individual feelings or experiences are banalizing and deforming, and somehow mutilate that which he/she is trying to evoke? As we shall see, both of these hypotheses are justified by comments regarding the nature of writing/language made by Leduc in her autobiographical texts and interviews. What follows is an attempt to explore them further, through a detailed analysis of *Thérèse et Isabelle*. My choice of this text as a focus reflects the fact that it deals almost exclusively with the (unrepresentable? 'difficult?') area of female eroticism and, moreover, contains an explicit articulation of Leduc's reservations regarding language.

WRITING AGAINST THE MASCULINE?

Violette Leduc undoubtedly lacked the politicized and above all post-Lacanian perspective regarding the pitfalls language holds for women (and in particular for the *écrivaine*) which informs the theoretical writings of contemporary French feminists. Yet there are indications that she sensed the sexes have a different relationship to the linguistic, and specifically the aesthetic, domain and that this poses problems for women writers. A passage contained in *Trésors à prendre*, for example, in which she addresses 'Madame' (Simone de Beauvoir, to whom the text is dedicated), suggests that this was the case:

Vous m'avez dit, Madame, que les femmes avant deux cents ans créeront ce que les hommes créent. Je vous crois, je veux vous croire, puisque vous, dans notre siècle, avec votre intelligence, avec les livres que vous écrivez, vous nous le prouvez avec beaucoup d'avance sur l'horaire, ce féminisme valeureux. [...] Avant deux cents ans... Il y a un "mais". Ce "mais" invincible c'est la liqueur de l'homme dans le pinceau du peintre, à la pointe du crayon de l'écrivain. (p. 196)

This is a rich and complex extract. Initially, we might be tempted to believe that Leduc is merely (and pessimistically) saying that literature and art are intrinsically 'virile' activities, access to which, for women, is difficult if not impossible (by virtue, presumably, of woman's 'castrated' state, or because 'culture' has historically belonged to men). The passage also has a more subtle, and more positive, dimension, however. In it, Leduc is examining Beauvoir's (reported) observation that in two hundred years, women will create 'ce que les hommes créent'. Although she seems at first to welcome this notion ('Je vous crois, je veux vous croire'), ultimately she refutes it. Her disagreement with Beauvoir may simply reflect a conviction that feminine creativity is rendered impracticable by woman's non-possession of 'la liqueur de l'homme'. Leduc's remarks may, on the other hand, signify a perception on her part that women's artistic and textual productions cannot, but more importantly *should* not, be identical to 'ce que les hommes créent'. We can interpret her comments to mean that women may have problems using aesthetic forms evolved by men, and that any attempt to do so is likely to be unproductive, but that this fact should not deter them from developing a different — feminine? — mode of creativity. When read in this way, the extract need no longer be taken merely to suggest that the creative process is inherently and irremediably virile, and therefore out of reach of women. It can be interpreted as evidence that Leduc (in contrast to her mentor Beauvoir) sensed that while art and writing, traditionally the preserve of men, have been 'marked' by the masculine, women's development of aesthetic forms and models of their *own* is not impossible and is, moreover, a task which is at once formidable and highly necessary.

Arguably, then, Leduc's awareness of the restrictive nature of language stemmed at least in part from her consciousness of the genderization of literary

discourse. Remarks made in later interviews indicate, furthermore, that once she began to write about feminine sexuality, and to discover the degree to which language separated her from her subject matter in this key area of experience, she made considerable efforts to overcome barriers raised by linguistic *sexuation*. It appears that she sought to do so by developing a (different) erotic discourse, which was related to her feminine gender and was intended to facilitate the ‘mise à jour nécessaire d’une sexualité trop longtemps maintenue secrète’.³³ Interviewed by Madeleine Chapsal after the publication of *La Bâtarde*, two years before *Thérèse et Isabelle* finally saw the light of day, Leduc intimated that she had attempted (and would continue to attempt) to create a ‘daring’ form of language which would illuminate feminine pleasure in a new and unique way. She makes it quite clear that such language can only be the province of the woman writer. She also indicates that if it is to exist at all, it must be produced by women who read, as she had read, the erotic writings of their ‘foremothers’, and who, whilst saluting the efforts of these authors, work to extend the discourses they evolved:

Voyez vous, j’ai beaucoup aimé Colette, qui est un bon écrivain, qui est très savante. Mais en la lisant, j’avais le sentiment qu’elle n’avait pas osé, qu’elle s’était retenue. Elle me donnait une sorte de faim, j’en voulais davantage. C’est cela mon but: approcher un peu la sensation dans l’érotisme, la décrire. Je ne suis pas allée très loin, je ne suis pas réellement arrivée à rendre comme il faut l’impression sensuelle. Mais je me dis: j’essaye de déblayer, d’autres y arriveront mieux que moi. Des femmes plus jeunes me liront et diront: “Cette Violette Leduc, elle n’a pas vraiment osé; moi, je vais oser . . .”.³⁴

The transgressive character of the feminine erotic discourse Leduc wished to create — which, unlike that produced by Colette, was clearly not predicated upon the premise that direct evocation of female and especially lesbian *jouissance* should be avoided³⁵ — is also made evident in an interview she gave to Pierre Démeron in 1966. In this interview, which appeared in *Candide* after the publication of *Thérèse et Isabelle*, Leduc demands that women, like men, should try to write freely about their sexuality, regardless of the difficulties they might encounter. She goes on:

Devant une feuille de papier je n’ai pas peur, alors que dans la vie je ne veux pas déranger l’ordre établi.³⁶

Leduc’s evocation of the *dérangement* of the *ordre établi* provoked by discourse of the kind she envisaged indicates her awareness of the disruptive character of such writing. Significantly, her comments are not totally dissimilar to those Irigaray makes regarding the effect upon the phallogentric symbolic/linguistic order of woman’s attempts to articulate her ‘other’ sexual pleasure. According to Irigaray, this pleasure is a ‘jouissance qui doit rester inarticulable dans le langage [. . .], sous peine de mettre en cause ce qui étaye le fonctionnement logique’.³⁷ Irigaray’s sense of the unsettling character of woman’s eroticism

and its transcription into language explains her belief, which Leduc seems also to have shared, that 'ce qui est aujourd'hui le plus interdit aux femmes est d'essayer de parler leur jouissance'.³⁸ Both she and Leduc however, in their different ways, stress the need to produce a discourse which overcomes the interdictions surrounding feminine *jouissance* and which attempts to give it expression in new, and startling, words.

In summary, Leduc's remarks in *Trésors à prendre* and in the interviews referred to above hint that she was not only alive to the masculine bias of the literary/linguistic sphere, but also sensed the restrictions this imposes to be particularly problematic for the woman writer seeking to depict her experience of sexuality. In this, she may be likened to Marie Cardinal, who expresses in *Autrement dit* her own awareness of the problems attendant upon women's articulation of the sexual ('La meilleure manière de prouver qu'il manque des mots, que le français n'est pas fait pour les femmes, c'est de nous mettre au ras de notre corps, d'exprimer l'inexprimé [. . .] Il deviendra alors évident et clair qu'il y a des choses que nous ne pouvons pas traduire en mots. Comment dire notre sexe, la gestation vécue, le temps, la durée des femmes? Il faudra inventer').³⁹ Leduc evidently also felt that women writers must evolve their own kind of erotic language in order to 'approcher un peu la sensation dans l'écriture', even if such an enterprise is difficult and disruptive. Her interview with Chapsal indicates, moreover, that she herself endeavoured to do so. It is therefore worth investigating the extent to which Leduc, responding to the problem of linguistic *sexuation* and its effects upon/within erotic discourse, was driven to work on elements of language in *Thérèse et Isabelle* in order to develop either an *écriture féministe* or a (more radical) *écriture féminine*.

These terms clearly require definition. The latter refers to the kind of discourse towards which much of the theoretical writings of Cixous and Irigaray points. It is a language which 'reinscribes' within the phallic symbolic, or writes differently, the repressed feminine, a 'language which would be adequate for the body, sex and the imagination (imaginary) of the woman'.⁴⁰ An *écriture féministe*, on the other hand, involves a sustained transgression of existing representational codes and linguistic styles which contribute to the denigration or subjection of women. *Ecriture féminine*, in other words, is a kind of gendered poetics, combining (potentially) a different *style* of writing and a language capable of articulating feminine difference/otherness. *Ecriture féministe* constitutes an attempt on the part of the *écrivaine* to subvert distorting images of femininity and also to avoid linguistic/semantic strategies that reinforce or reflect patriarchal power structures. The following parts of this chapter will be devoted to an exposition of the ways in which Leduc may be said, in her erotic writing, to tackle manifestations of linguistic genderization and to create the kind of feminist/feminine discourse defined above. My discussion will focus on three specific aspects of *Thérèse et Isabelle*; its relationship with texts written by

male authors in which feminine homoeroticism is an issue, its depiction of the female body, and its account of woman's sexual pleasure.

LESBIAN INTERTEXTS

As Irigaray suggests in *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, woman is constantly confronted with deformed and deforming representations of the female subject which are cultural embodiments of the masculine imaginary and which language bequeathes to her. They are so prevalent that, unless she is careful, she may internalize and perpetuate images of herself that bear little relation to the reality of her existence and experiences. My purpose here is to demonstrate that in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, Violette Leduc acknowledges (caricatural) representations of lesbianism inherited from male literary predecessors, and simultaneously undermines them, through a strategy of (ironic) rewriting. Her employment of intertextual parody is reminiscent of the deliberate subversion of existing cultural artefacts Cixous discerns in her own writing practice ('La culture [...] était donc là, mais faisant barre, m'interdisant, alors que, bien sûr, au fond de mon corps, j'avais un désir d'objets de culture. Je me suis donc façonnée dans la nécessité de les voler. [...] Je m'en suis toujours servie d'une façon complètement ironique').⁴¹ This technique constitutes one way in which Leduc detaches *Thérèse et Isabelle* from a gendered, masculine model of (erotic) discourse that distorts feminine homoerotic reality.⁴²

The lesbian relationship has preoccupied French female authors of the modern period, and has engendered texts which are radical and disturbing. Lesbian eroticism has also, however, been the subject of works by men of letters, particularly since the eighteenth century. These have been the focus of criticism by women scholars, who illuminate the stereotypes that have characterized representations of feminine homoeroticism in the past.⁴³ Before Leduc's mimetic/ironic treatment of such representations can be addressed, the nature of the literary tradition to which they belong must be elucidated.

Although the lesbian figured in French literature before 1700, the first extensive accounts of feminine homoerotic love did not appear until the eighteenth century. The most celebrated literary treatment of lesbianism published during the Enlightenment was offered by Diderot. On one level, *La Religieuse* may be deemed simply to highlight, objectively, the oppressive character of a single-sex environment and to reveal the psychological damage an individual may suffer as a result of enforced celibacy. Arguably, therefore, the novel provides no more than a clinically correct account of one way in which lesbian desire comes into being.⁴⁴ Despite their radicalism in most matters, however, the *Philosophes* tended to the reactionary when it came to women, and Diderot may be considered no exception. His presentation of the third Superior as a homosexual corruptress has been taken by Lillian Faderman as

evidence that he sought to use his account of lesbianism in order to condemn an institution — the convent — in which women achieved an autonomy denied them elsewhere, and to denigrate women who usurped masculine position and privilege.⁴⁵ While Faderman undoubtedly overstates her case and ignores the pleasure Diderot permits his heroine to experience in the company of the lesbian Superior, his depiction of feminine homoerotic ‘aberration’ in *La Religieuse* can none the less be interpreted as a strategy devised to castigate feminine self-sufficiency and to show such women the error of their ways.

In the nineteenth century, an increasing number of male writers took female homosexuality as their subject. Their treatments of ‘sapphism’ continued to be largely condemnatory, however. One reason for this may have been an association of lesbianism (woman’s sexual independence from man) and feminism (her political rejection of patriarchal structures). Antagonism towards female homosexuality masked, perhaps, an antifeminist reaction on the part of male authors, provoked by the growing refusal of nineteenth-century French women to accept traditional roles and socio-economic subjection.⁴⁶ The force of this reaction was fuelled toward the end of the century by sexological works in which feminism and lesbianism were explicitly linked — Havelock Ellis, for example, argues that ‘the modern movement of emancipation [. . .] has involved an increase in feminine criminality and in feminine insanity’ and comments that ‘in connection with these we can hardly be surprised to find an increase in homosexuality, which has always been regarded as belonging to an allied, if not the same, group of phenomena’.⁴⁷

The exotic ‘otherness’ of the lesbian fascinated various nineteenth-century male authors, regardless of whether they were sympathetic to feminine homosexuality. If Pierre Louÿs’s *Chansons de Bilitis* (1894) is semi-positive regarding lesbian relationships (which are none the less depicted stereotypically) and represents a challenge to prejudice against female homoeroticism, Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* and Balzac’s *La Fille aux yeux d’or* associate feminism same-sex love with decadence and violence; all three writers, however, evidently found lesbianism tantalizing and saw it as ‘synonymous with a mysterious world of feminine pleasure’.⁴⁸ Baudelaire’s ‘Lesbos’ and Balzac’s *La Fille aux yeux d’or* both contain accounts of lesbian episodes witnessed by a voyeur, the inclusion of which reflects a common perception that lesbian sex was an erotic performance, designed to arouse the male, rather than evidence of woman’s desire for her *semblable(s)*. As Shari Benstock suggests, ‘for heterosexual men [of nineteenth-century France], lesbian women were associated with a specialized form of prostitution. These lesbian roles were reinforced by nineteenth-century literature (especially in writings by Balzac, Zola, Louÿs, Gautier, and Baudelaire) and exploited by the more exotic Paris brothels, where the lesbian couple was the *pièce de résistance*’.⁴⁹

If stylists like Baudelaire were as much fascinated as repelled by the otherness of the lesbian, their realist colleagues were less ambivalent, and their treatments of female homosexuality were openly hostile. Following Diderot, social novelists presented lesbians as corrupt and corrupting, vampire seductresses who lead hapless victims astray. Adolphe Belot's *Mlle Giraud, ma femme* (1879) creates a vision of lesbian evil and condemns sexual segregation (here in a boarding school) as morally dangerous. Belot's assault on sapphism is echoed in Zola's *Nana* and Maupassant's *Le Femme de Paul* (1881); both works associate female homosexuality with prostitution and present lesbians as denizens of a perilous *bas-monde*. While Romantic and Decadent writers combined contrasting visions of lesbian exoticism and lesbian corruption, Belot and his successors created a more consistent image of the lesbian as monster.

Although, therefore, images of women loving women appeared more frequently in the texts of the nineteenth century than in those of the Enlightenment, the lesbian 'heroine' clearly fared no better during the later period. In the twentieth century, Proust's Gomorrah did little to transform the tradition of feminine homoerotic denigration. Although he was not crassly condemnatory, his lesbian creations, particularly Mlle Vinteuil and her friend, are depraved and, worse still, rather foolish. Moreover, as is the case with Baudelaire's lesbians, their function seems to be to tantalize a voyeur who witnesses their embraces, and they therefore reinforce a view of lesbianism as an erotic *pièce de résistance*. As female homosexuals, they are barely more convincing than their caricatured sisters of previous centuries, even though tolerance toward 'inversion' was greater by the time Proust was writing — hence Colette's perception that all he had to offer was a vision of a 'Gomorrhé d'insondables et de vicieuses jeunes filles', a 'collectivité de mauvais anges', devoid of 'la foudroyante vérité qui nous guidait à travers Sodome'.⁵⁰

As she wrote *Thérèse et Isabelle*, Leduc appears to have been alive to the existence of a well-established discourse on the theme of lesbianism produced almost exclusively by male authors. Indeed, the way in which her text echoes the works of some of these authors exemplifies what Barthes describes as 'l'impossibilité de vivre hors du texte infini'.⁵¹ However, *Thérèse et Isabelle* may be read as Leduc's attempt to 'write against', even as she appropriated elements of it, a masculine tradition of lesbian misrepresentation which she evidently scorned.

How can the reader be sure that she sought to do so? For one thing, her descriptions of the way in which the original version of her novella came into being indicate that she was driven by a need to institute a break between her own vision of female homosexuality and that conveyed by male-authored texts dealing with the same subject. A passage in *La Folie en tête* highlights her desire to represent feminine homoeroticism in such a way that the notion that

lesbianism is an erotic 'turn', a 'charming' feminine aberration providing the male imagination with a subject for its art and the masculine voyeur with sexual stimulation, might be refuted: 'Le sexe n'est pas charmant, le sexe n'est pas exquis. [. . .] Deux femmes se trouvent: ce ne sont pas des compensations, ce ne sont pas des consolations ou bien des gravures galantes. Je voudrais des funérailles mêlées à des fêtes de jambes' (pp. 297–98).

A further extract, from *La Chasse à l'amour* this time, indicates her wish to dismiss the association of lesbian sex and sin/damnation established by male writers of the past, particularly Diderot, who makes the connection in *La Religieuse*, and Baudelaire, who develops it in *Les Fleurs du mal*.⁵² Her own lesbian heroines, Leduc implies, are neither vicious nor doomed, because erotic activity permits them to achieve elevated states which resemble no ordinary human experience:

Thérèse et Isabelle sont trop authentiques pour être vicieuses. Il n'y a pas de vices. Il y a des malades à guérir. Le sexe est leur soleil aveuglant. Elles se caressent. C'est leur religion. Leur enfer, c'est le temps. Leur temps est limité. Ce ne sont pas des femmes damnées. Ce sont des privilégiées. Elles échangent ce qu'elles ont trouvé. Elles découvrent le monde entre deux jambes. (p. 21)

The extent of Leduc's desire to interrogate existing visions of lesbianism is revealed most clearly by the 'corrective' references to the works of Diderot, Baudelaire, and Proust contained in the 1966 version of *Thérèse et Isabelle*. Their inclusion suggests that in her novella Leduc consolidated her (feminist) repudiation of masculinist representations of feminine homosexuality, by employing intertextual mimicry in order to dismantle the (gendered) discourse on lesbianism the most illustrious of her male predecessors offered.⁵³

There are evident similarities between *Thérèse et Isabelle* and *La Religieuse*. Both texts place their characters within the 'gynaecium' setting favoured in works dealing with feminine homoeroticism as a site of lesbian love. If Leduc's *collège* is a secularized version of Diderot's convent, her heroines none the less resemble his *religieuses* in various ways. Each sleeps in a *cellule* in which solitary chastity should prevail, and each must accept a *régime* whose highly regulated, austere character recalls monastic life. Isabelle's hair is compared to a *voile* on several occasions (pp. 59, 60, 92), and Leduc depicts her as she makes love to Thérèse in an attitude of prayer ('Elle [. . .] s'agenouilla . . . une sainte lécha mes souillures', p. 34). Thérèse's dressing gown becomes a habit when she mentions 'la cordelière de ma robe' (p. 90), and when, overwhelmed by the force of Isabelle's orgasm, she recalls 'J'ai eu des stigmates aux entrailles' (p. 53), her experience echoes some of the more excessive manifestations of religious zeal. The expressions of love each girl articulates are 'litanies sans paroles' (p. 71), while pleasure shared with the loved one is a confusion of 'abnégation' and 'béatitude' (p. 52), both (potential) characteristics of a conventual existence.

The above indicates that Leduc consciously sought to duplicate elements of *La Religieuse* (and of the lesbian/convent topos Diderot's novel exemplifies) in *Thérèse et Isabelle*. The relationship between the two texts is, however, more antagonistic than the preceding paragraph suggests, since the account she provides of the 'cloistered' life led by her heroines differs considerably from Diderot's. For Diderot, the institutionalized world of the convent was the source of the plight of his central character, since it exposed her to the risk of physical and psychological harm. In *Thérèse et Isabelle*, on the other hand, the gynaeceum is a protective sphere within which a unique form of self/other interaction becomes accessible. Furthermore, 'religion', far from denoting the institutional/restrictive, becomes a metaphor for all that is private and delightful. Leduc conjures its rituals and rewards in order to evoke a sensual universe to which her protagonists gain entry by virtue of their love. The religious experience is no longer the cause of lesbian 'vice' but rather represents one manifestation amongst many of feminine homoerotic pleasure, discovered in a domain in which the concept of vice has no significance. Leduc's employment of religious imagery ('J'avais la grâce dans le sang, ma mort se laissait corrompre', p. 98; 'Le corps d'Isabelle gravit seul un calvaire sur mon dos', p. 102; 'Marcher sur les flots . . . Je sais ce que cela veut dire sur le fleuve de mes cuisses', p. 107) does not constitute therefore a (childish) blasphemy against conventional Christian morality and its dictates. It enables her rather to recall, and transform, Diderot's cautionary tale of lesbian aberrance generated by institutionalized religion, a transformation achieved through her presentation of feminine homoerotic ecstasy as a sublime, spiritual experience, rather than as a pathological symptom of the unnatural existence led by the 'religious'.

A particular episode of *Thérèse et Isabelle* connects it more firmly with *La Religieuse*, and indicates strongly that Leduc was attempting to rewrite Diderot's (on one level) hostile representation of lesbianism. Early on in the novella, she depicts Thérèse loving Isabelle as a mother might her child, warming her feet in a gesture of comfort:

J'allongeais mon petit, je lui soulevais la tête, je tapotais l'oreiller, je défroissais, je rajeunissais le lit.

– Tu me soignes, dit Isabelle.

Je réchauffais son pied sur mon sein. Isabelle me donnait un enfant. Tantôt je faisais l'amour avec lui, tantôt je le remettais dans le moise. (p. 22)

This scene is one of generous emotion, in which each partner gives without thought of return and receives from the other the love she has expended. Communion and reciprocity are thus achieved. It may be contrasted with an episode in *La Religieuse*, whose similarity seems unlikely to be coincidental. In the last section of Diderot's work, as in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, the two female protagonists are alone together at night, in the cell of the younger nun,

Suzanne. The Mother Superior demands of and receives from her subordinate the same form of comfort Thérèse offers Isabelle, warming, ‘maternal’ caresses (‘Aussitôt elle mit une de ses mains sur ma *poitrine* et l’autre autour de ma ceinture; ses *pieds* étaient posés sous les miens, et je les pressais pour les *réchauffer*; et la chère mère me disait: “Ah! chère amie, voyez comme mes *pieds* se sont promptement *réchauffés*, parce qu’il n’y a rien qui les sépare des vôtres”).⁵⁴ It is made clear to the reader, however, that the older woman’s purpose is exploitative, and that she uses her position and intelligence in order to oblige Suzanne to do what is asked of her. In this episode, Diderot creates an image of lesbian perversity masked as innocence, triumphing over youthful inexperience. In Leduc’s reiteration of the scene, on the other hand, a love mutually desired and freely given provides the key, and subverts Diderot’s vision.

Leduc also ‘writes against’ representations of lesbianism offered by Baudelaire in ‘Lesbos’ and ‘Femmes damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte’.⁵⁵ Despite the poet’s fascination with the unfamiliar world of female homoeroticism, and his apparent reverence for Lesbos, with its ‘noir mystère’ (p. 135) and its ‘vierges en fleurs’ (p. 135), his attitude to lesbianism appears condemnatory. He decries, for example, the barren character of the lesbian relation, conjuring the ‘stérile volupté’ (p. 134) of lesbian caresses and informing his *femmes damnées*, Delphine and Hippolyte, that the ‘âpre stérilité’ (p. 139) of their *jouissance* will ultimately provoke their moral and physical disintegration. Its sterility, which may be read quite literally as a reference to an absence of procreative potential, seems to render the female homoerotic bond invalid to the poet — although, as Claude Pichois comments, Baudelaire’s ‘opposition morale et théologique à la nature, à la fécondation’ could be said to make Lesbos (‘la patrie de la contre-nature et de la stérilité’) more rather than less appealing to him.⁵⁶ Moreover, while Baudelaire suggests that the relationship between Delphine and Hippolyte resembles a mother/daughter bond, he refuses to recognize that their union might consequently be nurturing and life-affirming, since he has Hippolyte tell her ‘mother’: ‘Je veux m’anéantir dans ta gorge profonde/ Et trouver sur ton sein la fraîcheur des tombeaux’ (p. 139). Rather than a fruitful gift, ‘maternal’ nurturance is transformed, in its lesbian manifestation, into a form of insidious destruction, and the sterility of the lesbian union remains unattenuated.

Leduc takes up the challenge posed by Baudelaire’s evocation of lesbian sterility. Her lyrical account of lesbian love presents feminine homoeroticism as infinitely fruitful. The absence of a male lover does not prevent a form of ‘procreative’ exchange (‘Isabelle me donnait un enfant. Tantôt je faisais l’amour avec lui, tantôt je le remettais dans le moïse’, p. 22; ‘Je portais l’enfant le plus ressemblant qu’elle pût me donner d’elle: je portais l’enfant de sa présence’, p. 108) and when her heroines adopt mother and daughter roles in

the course of their erotic games, the *anéantissement* evoked by Baudelaire is replaced by generous, fecund nurturance. This is implied early on in the novella, when Thérèse describes how, after she and Isabelle make love, she nestles against her lover ('Je baillais dans les prés laitieux et mouillés', p. 33), and is also implicit in her later reference to their breasts, which, as arousal draws the adolescents together, provide erotic stimulation and 'nourishment' ('Deux gorges s'élançèrent, quatre foyers de douceur irradièrent. De l'absinthe coula dans mes veines', p. 95).

Baudelaire's Delphine is a descendant of Diderot's Superior, an experienced lesbian bent on manipulating a younger, malleable partner. The poet suggests her 'perverse' nature by transforming her into the ultimate symbol of lesbian evil, the vampire.⁵⁷ Delphine is presented as an 'animal fort qui surveille une proie/ Après l'avoir marquée avec les dents' (p. 137), ready, once Hippolyte is subjugated, to absorb 'voluptueusement/ le vin de son triomphe' (p. 137) as if it were the blood of the younger woman, who becomes her lover's 'pâle victime' (p. 137). Traditionally, the image of the vampire has formed part of a discourse of lesbian denigration, but Leduc reclaims the symbol from a canon that subjects feminine homosexuality to mockery and condemnation. As we saw in chapter three, her lesbians each adopt the vampiric role in the course of their erotic games; yet neither, as she 'eats' the other, reduces her lover to a 'proie', humiliated and possessed. Instead of representing a cliché symbolizing lesbian evil, cannibalistic vampirism is transformed by Leduc into one element within a polymorphously erotic universe in which all gestures of love are equally valuable.

More significant than Baudelaire's perception of the lesbian as a vampire is his vision of her as a *femme damnée*, which he also inherited from Diderot. Delphine and Hippolyte are doomed socially ('Loin des peuples vivants, errantes, condamnées/ A travers les déserts courez comme des loups;/ Faites votre destin, âmes désordonnées [. . .]') (p. 139)) and physically ('Jamais un rayon frais n'éclaira vos cavernes/ Par les fentes des murs des miasmes fiévreux/ Filtrent en s'enflammant ainsi que des lanternes/ Et pénètrent vos corps de leurs parfums affreux' (p. 139)); above all, however, their sexuality condemns them to an eternity of spiritual torment:

– Descendez, descendez, lamantables victimes,
Descendez le chemin de l'enfer éternel!
Plongez au plus profond du gouffre, où tous les crimes,
Flagellés par un vent qui ne vient pas du ciel,

Bouillonnent pêle-mêle avec un bruit d'orage.
Ombres folles, courez au but de vos désirs;
Jamais vous ne pourrez assouvir votre rage,
Et votre châtement naîtra de vos plaisirs. (p. 139)

Baudelaire's tone here is (on one level, at least) ironic. It reflects a social and moral judgement he did not entirely share, and disguises the solidarity with his sapphic heroines he undoubtedly felt.⁵⁸ None the less, the image he created of the lesbian as a damned soul is powerful, and its shadow hangs over *Thérèse et Isabelle*. If Baudelaire depicts an existence 'loin des peuples vivants' as a punishment, however, Leduc's Thérèse envisages social exclusion as the means to achieve a more permanent freedom to love. In one of Thérèse's silent monologues, nature and isolation combine to provide a perfect erotic environment, and Leduc's refutation of Baudelaire's wretched lesbian wastelands is palpable:

Donnez-nous vos haillons, saisons. Soyons les vagabondes aux cheveux laqués par la pluie. Veux-tu, Isabelle, veux-tu te mettre en ménage avec moi sur le bord d'un talus? Nous mangerons nos croûtons avec des mâchoires de lion, nous trouverons le poivre dans la bourrasque, nous aurons une maison, des rideaux de dentelle pendant que les roulottes passeront et s'en iront aux frontières. Je te déshabillerai dans les blés, je t'hébergerai à l'intérieur des meules, je te couvrirai dans l'eau sous les basses branches, je te soignerai sur la mousse des forêts, je te prendrai dans la luzerne, je te hisserai sur les chars à foin, ma Carolingienne. (pp. 43–44)

She also replaces his foul nocturnal caverns with a lesbian nightworld in which darkness offers healthy, maternal protection ('La nuit s'engageait, la nuit: notre couverture de cygne. La nuit: notre baldaquin de mouettes', p. 89) and her lovers' erotic exchanges generate their own illumination ('Nous avons été béantes de lumière, nous avons eu une irruption de félicité. Nos jambes broyées de délices, nos entrailles illuminées', p. 107)). More importantly, as she points out in *La Chasse à l'amour*, her lesbians are clearly *privilegiées* rather than *damnées*. Lesbian eroticism assures access not to the infernal abyss but to a paradise of pleasure:

Isabelle voyait son paradis. (p. 52)

La visite était proche dans mon paradis. (p. 107)

Je me détachais de mon squelette, je flottais sur ma poussière. (p. 107)

Various aspects of Leduc's picture of female homosexuality in *Thérèse et Isabelle* may therefore be read as a rejection of the exotic, febrile vision of lesbian marginality which emerges from Baudelaire's poems. A further intertextual subversion is generated by her treatment of a relationship which Baudelaire evokes in 'Lesbos' but which is also, more famously, depicted by Proust in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, that of the lesbian couple and the voyeur. In Baudelaire's poem and especially in the scene Proust creates between Mlle Vinteuil and her female lover in *Du Côté de chez Swann*, a male narrator/voyeur appears to be sexually aroused by the spectacle of lesbian activity, illuminating the much exploited potential of the lesbian bond as an erotic 'turn', and echoing the point made by Lucienne Frappier-Masur that in

male-authored erotic discourse 'lesbianism is a pretext for scenes of voyeurism, in which secret observation asserts the observer's superiority'.⁵⁹ In the Montjouvain episode of *Du Côté de chez Swann*, moreover, Proust seems to suggest that the lesbians themselves require the presence of a male watcher in order to achieve a full complement of pleasure,⁶⁰ implying that without a masculine spy, 'sapphic' sex might well not have taken place at all.

Mlle Vinteuil and her friend cannot, of course, be assured of the gaze of a human voyeur to stimulate their desire; they are, however, able to solicit voyeuristic scrutiny by using the picture of Vinteuil *père*, the dead music teacher. Before it, their caresses take on the character of a profanatory rite, yet their inclusion of the father in their erotic rituals suggests that they demand his approval, even as they desecrate his memory. As Randolph Splitter explains, 'the implication is not that Mlle Vinteuil is betraying her father for a "mother" but that even her betrayal expresses a need to be acknowledged, to be loved by the father'.⁶¹ Proust therefore creates a complex scene with not one but two voyeurs in it; one of whom (Marcel, the narrator/protagonist of *A la Recherche*) is hidden from the lesbians but is aroused by them because he views their embraces as a sadoerotic performance, and the other of whom is vitally important to the lovers' sexual encounter, even though he is dead. The gaze of at least one of the voyeurs, if not both, is clearly presented as welcome to the lesbians.

It is difficult not to interpret the brothel episode in *Thérèse et Isabelle* as an intertextual reinscription of the account Proust gives the reader, in *Du Côté de chez Swann*, of the lesbian/voyeur relationship. Firstly, although based upon the same triangular situation as the Montjouvain incident, the voyeurism scene Leduc creates in her novella resolutely refuses the association of the voyeur's scrutiny and the arousal of lesbian desire which Proust sets up. As we saw in chapter three, Thérèse and Isabelle become the objects of a voyeur's gaze when they visit Mlle Algazine's 'maison de rendez-vous', hoping to experience a degree of sensual delight denied them within the bounds of their school. However, their pleasure is adulterated by Thérèse's fear of the disembodied eye she believes to be staring at them through an *œil de bœuf* — another Proustian detail, borrowed this time from the sadoomasochism episode in Jupien's hotel in *Le Temps retrouvé*. The visit is damaging rather than liberating, and the lovers return, chastened, to the *collège*.

In contrast to Proust, then, Leduc presents voyeuristic scrutiny as the means by which lesbian desire is destroyed. Furthermore, her narrative undermines the centrality accorded to the male voyeuristic subject in Proust's Montjouvain episode. This is because the brothel scene in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, which is narrated from a first-person lesbian perspective, obviously foregrounds the dynamics of *feminine* homosexual exchange and not its arousing effect upon the *male* spy who observes it. The voyeur whose existence is suspected by

Thérèse, although a powerful element of disruption, is simply a ghostly, elliptical half-presence, half-absence, rather than a sexually stimulated narrator like Proust's Marcel, whose responses and reflections dominate the description of the events at Montjouvain. Consequently, the whole emphasis of Proust's version of the lesbian/voyeur topos is turned around. The voyeurism episode Leduc creates in *Thérèse et Isabelle* constitutes, in other words, a scene whose intertextual modifications 'correct', up to a point, Proust's vision of Gomorrah, and rescue lesbianism from a masculine literary field in which it represents a source of titillation for the male author/reader/voyeur.

Clearly, Leduc's creation of mimetic parallels enables her to 'write against' representations that belong to a deforming, male-authored erotic tradition, and indicates that in *Thérèse et Isabelle* she does evolve a kind of *écriture féministe*. If these parallels were the only evidence of an attempt on her part to produce a feminist text, the subversive potential of her novella would be rather restricted, since intertextual mimesis has its limitations. The value of 'borrowing' from the 'Fathers' is questionable, and, as Domna Stanton observes, 'the repetition of masculinist notions and images of the feminine does not necessarily have a ludic or subversive impact that points to an elsewhere'.⁶² However, *Thérèse et Isabelle* is 'feminist' on other levels too. The techniques Leduc employs in it to write about the female body, for example, make it possible to read her text as a more radical assault upon masculine representational models. Leduc's 'body language', as we shall see in the next part of this chapter, constitutes another sort of *écriture féministe* which comes close to resembling an *écriture féminine*.

HEALING THE BODY: NAMING STRATEGIES

Fetichizing fragmentation of the female body is a key and enduring feature of (male-authored) erotic discourse. As Helena Michie points out, 'in Victorian literature and culture various parts of the body came to be fetichized sexually and representationally, as nameable, accessible parts of the body came to stand for the unnameable whole/hole. Twentieth-century sexual culture, the sexual "revolution", has produced an inversion of Victorian representational tropes, where the historically unnameable parts of the female body came to stand for the rest of it'.⁶³ Michie's observations concerning the treatment of the female form in the erotic texts/visual images of our period are borne out by, *inter alia*, the writings of Henry Miller, in which, for Kate Millett at least, what is achieved is 'a complete depersonalization of woman into cunt'.⁶⁴ In novels such as *Sexus*, the female body ceases to be an organic unity and is reduced instead to a limited number of objectified parts, which correspond to the erotic needs/fantasies of the (twentieth-century, Western) male subject. In the erotic texts produced by modern French male authors which Anne-Marie Dardigna

analyses in *Les Châteaux d'Eros*, especially those of Robbe-Grillet and Klossowski, a similar tendency towards a *morcellement* or synecdochization of the body of the feminine object is apparent. It produces an 'anatomie fantasmatique du corps féminin',⁶⁵ which is in evidence, for instance, in the opening paragraph of Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de rendez-vous*:

La chair des femmes a toujours occupé, sans doute, une très grande place dans mes rêves. Même à l'état de veille, ses images ne cessent de m'assaillir. Une fille en robe d'été qui offre sa nuque courbée — elle rattache sa sandale — la chevelure à demi renversée découvrant la peau fragile et son duvet blond, je la vois aussitôt soumise à quelque complaisance, tout de suite excessive. L'étroite jupe entravée, fendue jusqu'aux cuisses, des élégantes de Hong Kong se déchire d'un coup sous une main violente, qui dénude soudain la hanche arrondie, ferme, lisse, brillante, et la tendre chute des reins. Le fouet de cuir, dans la vitrine d'un sellier parisien, les seins exposés de mannequins de cire, une affiche de spectacle, la réclame pour des jarretelles ou pour un parfum, deux lèvres humides, disjointes, un bracelet de fer, un collier à chien, dressent autour de moi leur décor insistant, provocateur.⁶⁶

Dardigna suggests that the masculine narrators/protagonists created by writers like Robbe-Grillet subject their female partners to bodily fragmentation in order to possess them more completely, and, in so doing, to confer upon themselves a quasi-superhuman status:

Il s'agit bien de les déposséder de leur corps, et à travers leur corps de leur identité. Cette expropriation/appropriation n'est possible pour le démiurge masculin qu'à condition d'une déconstruction radicale du sujet féminin — jusqu'à ce qu'il n'existe plus par lui-même. C'est alors la dernière phase de la possession.⁶⁷

In erotic writing of the type cited above, the process of dismemberment and fetichization to which women are subjected constitutes a sustained assault on the integrity of the female body. It should come as no surprise therefore that modern women writers who have attempted to create their own erotic language(s) have sought to evolve new ways of treating the female anatomy. As Michie points out, 'a major although not always articulated task of feminist writing has, so far, been the full and responsible representation of the female body [. . .]. Since the early nineteen seventies, feminism has, in most of its manifestations, set out to do just that: to construct a female body in the face of patriarchal convention'.⁶⁸ In *Le Corps lesbien*, for example — probably the most radical erotic narrative written by a woman to date — Wittig periodically interrupts her poetic monologue in order to enumerate all the component elements of woman's body. This, as Martha Evans notes, is a strategy designed in part to illuminate the *morcellement* women suffer; it reminds the reader of how masculinist culture/language fragments and fetichizes (parts of) the female form, and in so doing repudiates this process:

The female body is a list: words next to each other, parts next to each other, without any apparent connections. By their syncopated appearances in an already

discontinuous text, these lists represent the final reduction of the female to a selfless and random agglomeration of word-objects.⁶⁹

Leduc's approach to writing the body differs from that adopted by Wittig — who, interestingly, cites Leduc as the only French woman writer she can acknowledge as a predecessor⁷⁰ — since it emphasizes healing and wholeness, rather than dismemberment. However, like Wittig, Leduc undoubtedly 'forces us to question our acceptance of male fragmentation of the body into discrete objects labelled "desirable" and "undesirable"'.⁷¹ As we saw in chapter three, *Thérèse et Isabelle* indicates that the lesbian relationship, if it escapes the limitations of the heterosexual model and becomes genuinely 'other', allows the female body in its entirety to become eroticized. In making this apparent, Leduc names the whole of the body, with the result that a myriad of anatomical parts, usually absent from erotic discourse of the kind produced by Miller *et al.*, are insistently evoked in her novella. Arms, fingers, necks, legs, hair, bellies, hands, ankles, backs, shoulders, eyebrows, eyelashes, and faces all play a part in the sexual carnival and are resolutely cited by Leduc throughout the text. Instead of depicting a female body that is no more than a fetichized 'cunt', or presenting 'comme autant d'objets hétéroclites des morceaux de la chair des femmes',⁷² Leduc names a feminine anatomy which is whole because her naming puts it back together and allows it to 'speak'. She consequently escapes the tradition of erotic *morcellement* and substitutes connection and unification for dislocation.

Leduc takes her (feminist) strategy of denominational subversion a stage further when she evokes the parts of the female body which *are* named (and fetichized) in contemporary erotic writing. Although she cites, insistently and directly, those elements of woman's anatomy which are obfuscated in male-authored texts, her references to the genitalia and breasts of her heroines are, on the whole, less explicit — she employs, for example, the word 'sexe' only ten times in the course of her novella (pp. 17, 50, 51, 52, 53, 77, 78, 92). Her treatment of these body parts takes two forms. Firstly, she employs figurative language in order to describe the clitoris, which is variously a 'perle' (pp. 52, 52, 105, 106) and a 'bourgeon précieux' (p. 35), and the vagina, which becomes for example a 'rosace' (p. 25), an 'agneau doré' (p. 50), a 'petit mongoli' or 'petit mordoré' (p. 50), a 'médaillon' (p. 50), 'de la nuit salée [. . .] de la nuit gluante [. . .] de la viande fragile' (p. 51), a 'carpe chérie' (p. 77), a 'bouche sousmarine adorée' (p. 77), a 'monstre rose' (p. 77), an 'anémone mouillée' (p. 77) and a 'sainte image' (pp. 77–78). Secondly, she resorts to a strategy of silence. In her evocation of Thérèse's 'ingestion' of Isabelle's breast, Leduc is elliptical rather than explicit:

– Mieux que cela, suppliait Isabelle.
Il ne quitta pas ma bouche lorsque nous tombâmes sur le parquet.

Je le gardais dans mes mains, je retenais son poids de tiédeur, de pâleur, de tendresse. Mon ventre était affamé de lueur.

– Caresse-le, dit Isabelle.

– Non!

J'ouvris la bouche, il entra. (p. 95)

and she uses the same, obscuring 'le' instead of an unequivocal *vagin/sexe/clitoris* elsewhere in her text:

Je le berçais, je l'aiguissais, je le sortais des replis de sa déchéance, je lui rendais confiance. Je ne me souviendrais pas de lui ainsi si je ne lui avais pas donné mon âme et ma vie. (p. 106)

J'ouvris ses lèvres et me suicidai avant de regarder. Mon visage le touchait, mon visage le mouillait. Je me mis à l'aimer de franche amitié. (p. 109)

Given her belief that women needed to 'oser' in order to represent their erotic experiences, it seems unlikely that Leduc's reluctance to name, explicitly, the most obviously sexual elements of the bodies of her heroines stemmed from a desire to veil those elements, in order not to shock. We do not need, either, to interpret her choice of metaphorical language to denote the female sexual organs as evidence of an incapacity on her part to elude the 'sépulture décorative', the 'couches de style ornemental',⁷³ the 'sinister "covering" of the female body'⁷⁴ which certain contemporary feminists — including Irigaray — view as symptomatic of a culture that cannot ultimately face/articulate the reality of the feminine (anatomy). Leduc's metaphorization of the female genitals can be read rather as part of her attempt to *déranger* a mode of erotic discourse, created by male writers, which exploits explicitation in order to 'damage' women's bodies. Her employment of metaphor distances an erotic rhetoric which focuses obsessively/exclusively on the female sexed parts, and presents them with a directness that renders them obscene. In the erotic writing of authors like Miller and Robbe-Grillet, obscene explicitation 'is a form of violence, a manner of conveying male hostility, both toward the female (who is sex) and toward sexuality itself (which is her fault)'.⁷⁵ By adopting a figurative mode, Leduc effectively repudiates the violence to which woman risks exposure, linguistically as well as physically, within the patriarchal system. In refusing to be sexually explicit/textually brutal in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, she evolves a non-violent discourse of the female body, which displaces denigratory bodily images found in erotic texts by men.

The codes Leduc employs in order to evoke the feminine genitals do not resemble the banal metaphors traditionally associated with the female anatomy in male-authored erotic writings which tend to the figurative rather than the explicit. In his *Dictionnaire historique, stylistique, rhétorique, étymologique de la littérature érotique*, Pierre Guiraud includes a list of those images which have commonly been used to figure feminine sexual parts in French erotic

language. He suggests, moreover, that this language, which he too perceives as masculine-gendered, cannot adequately represent woman's body and sexuality:

Il est frappant de constater que ce langage — si on en juge au nombre des mots, des images et à leur pertinence et leur originalité — est très pauvre et souvent inadéquat quant à la description de la sexualité féminine dont nous commençons pourtant à soupçonner aujourd'hui qu'elle est physiologiquement et psychophysiologiquement plus complexe et plus riche que celle de l'homme. Et cette carence du langage est une véritable castration [. . .].⁷⁶

Only rarely do Leduc's genital metaphors constitute the kind of overworked, 'masculine' images listed in Guiraud's *dictionnaire*, images like *fournaise* (p. 53), *nid* (p. 31), *toison* (p. 108), or *pétales* (p. 109), for example. Leduc's imaginary is infinitely richer and, when she does resort to conventional codes, she transforms them by qualifying them in unusual or surprising ways, or by extending their scope. Isabelle's sex is not merely a *bouche*, for instance, but becomes instead a 'bouche sousmarine adorée', and the ubiquitous *rose* (a very common metaphor for the vagina) is variously replaced with 'rosace', 'cœur de rose' (p. 14) and 'monstre rose'. This suggests that Leduc's discourse of the female body, even when it comes close to falling into metaphorical banality, represents a stylistic regeneration of a pre-existent erotic/linguistic model she found inadequate.

Leduc's metaphorization of the sexed elements of the feminine form appears, like her use of intertextual mimicry, to be the product of a reaction against a (male) erotic rhetoric with which she was clearly familiar. Although less obviously marked by that rhetoric than her intertextual 'borrowings' are by the tradition of lesbian (mis)representation, her poetic body-writing none the less stands in (an antagonistic) relation to it. Leduc's figurative depiction of woman's sexual parts still represents therefore an *écriture féministe*, albeit of a more original kind than that constituted by her rewriting of male accounts of lesbianism. However, her employment of ellipsis suggests that *Thérèse et Isabelle* contains instances of a 'déconcertation du langage',⁷⁷ which (for the post-Lacanian feminist critic at least) arguably 'reinscribes' the feminine and may be taken as evidence of a kind of *écriture féminine*. Ellipsis involves the deliberate inclusion, within language, of 'blanks' or 'absences'; it places emphasis on, and gives value to, that which is left silent. In *Thérèse et Isabelle*, the 'unsaid' is used in connection with woman's sex and her breasts, i.e. with those features of her anatomy which signify the feminine difference/otherness that is denigrated or ignored within phallogocentric culture. Leduc's ostentatious obfuscation of these anatomical elements, and the narrative 'disruption' this obfuscation produces, can be read as a textual strategy that is somehow 'feminine'.⁷⁸ Existing critical accounts of the work of another French woman writer, Marguerite Duras, help us to see how this might be the case.

Textual silences/gaps are much in evidence in Duras's *œuvre*. One explanation of this feature of her writing is that her use of ellipsis figures and celebrates 'la dimension fascinante du manque du pénis féminin: que Duras tente de [. . .] faire "parler" comme cri (*Moderato cantabile*), ou comme "musique"'.⁷⁹ Another interpretation, which constructs Duras's employment of ellipsis in a more helpful way, suggests that by breaking up the smooth movement of her narrative with gaps which point up the silencing of the feminine in 'phallic' language and simultaneously undermine the coherence of that same language, Duras creates, quite markedly, an 'other' style. Durassian ellipsis, Marcelle Marini implies, brings into being a language which palpably illuminates the masking of difference in discourse, and which represents, conceivably, a language of the feminine:

[Les "blancs" dans les textes de Marguerite Duras] dessinent "les lieux de son exclusion comme femme". [. . .] Dans le jeu des blancs avec les signes, du silence avec le dit, s'opère, par effraction du texte-discours clôturant, un autre style d'inscription-parole, au point que même le rapport de l'écrire au dire peut en être changé.⁸⁰

Marini is exploiting here an argument offered by Irigaray, in *Speculum, de l'autre femme*. In the essay 'Toute théorie du sujet', Irigaray claims that by manipulating 'ces blancs du discours qui rappellent les lieux de son exclusion' in such a way that a syntactical/lexical 'bouleversement' is achieved, a woman can 'rouvr[ir] des chemins dans un (encore) logos qui la connote comme châtrée, notamment et surtout de paroles'.⁸¹ It is precisely the notion of a feminine 'reopening' of discourse which Marini is foregrounding when she evokes the 'autre style' Durassian ellipsis engenders. So how does her reading relate to *Thérèse et Isabelle*? Leduc's novella is less obviously experimental than much of Duras's *œuvre*. However, the fact that it contains examples of elliptical 'body language' means that we can, if we accept the critical perspective outlined above,⁸² read it as marked by stylistic features which resemble those used by Duras, which effectively reveal/undermine the exclusion ('castration') of the feminine in language, and which can be viewed as emblematic of an 'other' mode of discourse. In other words, in those parts of *Thérèse et Isabelle* where Leduc resorts to a strategy of silence, and where her narrative becomes disruptive and disrupted precisely as a result of her deliberate effacement of that which signals woman's difference, she may be considered, paradoxically, to produce a 'feminine-gendered' kind of writing. In the next part of my discussion, which will examine Leduc's treatment of erotic sensation, further potential manifestations of *écriture féminine* in *Thérèse et Isabelle* will be scrutinized. In particular, Leduc's use of metaphor — which, according to Cixous, 'drive[s] language mad', 'smashes language from all sides' and is therefore related to the expression of unrepresented feminine 'otherness' and

to a feminine style that undermines the monolithic 'phallicity' of the linguistic realm — will be re-examined.⁸³

SEXUAL PLEASURE/TEXTUAL DIFFERENCE?

Like her representations of the female genitalia, Leduc's treatment of feminine pleasure in *Thérèse et Isabelle* is highly figurative. Her metaphors of feminine erotic sensation fall into a number of central categories, the largest of which draws upon the world of nature. Her text contains fourteen images relating to flora and fauna, including:

Elle se dégagea, elle recula, elle revint, elle me changea en magnolia (p. 10)

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)

Des lianes se détendirent, une clarté se propagea dans nos chevilles (p. 32)

Le nénuphar s'ouvrira dans mon ventre (p. 92)

Les feuilles de lilas déroulaient leur douceur (p. 106)

Les veilleuses se ranimaient, la pieuvre refaisait son travail d'accrochage (p. 100)

La mélopée tournait en rond dans mes coudes, dans mes genoux (p. 98)

Leduc also evokes other aspects of the natural realm, including the elements ('nous avons éventé les caresses, nous avons créé des motifs avec de la brise marine, nous avons enveloppé de zéphyrs nos jambes', pp. 31–32; 'J'avais un carambolage de nuages dans mes entrailles', p. 109), and the seasons ('Nous avons effleuré et survolé nos épaules avec les doigts fauves de l'automne', p. 31; 'le printemps me mettait à l'agonie', p. 106), and creates visions of explosions of light and heat ('nous avons lancé à grands traits la lumière dans les nids', p. 31; 'Mon ardeur gagna Isabelle, un soleil fou tournoya dans ma chair', p. 102; 'nous avons été béantes de lumière', p. 107; 'une flamme de velours se tordit dans mes jambes', p. 107), in order to suggest the powerful character of the feelings her heroines enjoy.

A second key image-group involves nine metaphors which relate to death and present orgasm as a cessation of existence, a movement toward physical decomposition. It includes the following:

Nous avons roulé enlacées sur une pente de ténèbres. Nous avons cessé de respirer pour l'arrêt de vie et l'arrêt de mort. (p. 107)

Nos membres mûrissaient, nos charognes se décomposaient. Exquise pourriture. (p. 98)

J'étais amollie jusqu'à l'ineffable pourriture, je ne finissais pas de m'effondrer de félicité en félicité dans ma poussière. (p. 102)

[...] le printemps me mettait à l'agonie, la poussière des morts dansait dans ma lumière. (p. 106)

The above are only a sample of the numerous metaphorical phrases denoting feminine sexual pleasure — there are some eighty-seven in total — contained in Leduc's novella. Like her references to religion, food, music, madness, military activity, and a whole range of sense-related phenomena, they reveal the lyrical form her attempt to 'approcher un peu la sensation dans l'érotisme, la décrire' took. But do Leduc's metaphors engender the kind of language which feminist theorists have deemed to be an *écriture féminine*, i.e. a radical discourse of feminine difference? Can the reader justifiably conclude from them that *Thérèse et Isabelle* is a 'feminine' text?

The lyricism that characterizes those parts of Leduc's novella in which *jouissance* is evoked metaphorically recalls the writings of Anaïs Nin. Significantly, Nin explicitly related figurative, poetic language of the kind she and Leduc both evolved to a feminine form of writing which might, unlike that of Henry Miller, unlock the mysteries of women's sensuality.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the particular experience conveyed by some of Leduc's metaphors suggests that in *Thérèse et Isabelle* she was working towards (and achieved?) the creation of a language capable of representing feminine eroticism in a unique, and even 'gendered', way. The most striking thing about many of her images is that they foreground a dissolution of the boundaries between self and world, between the female subject and the material/natural environment, and indicate that sexual pleasure involves an attenuation of the limits and limitations of the individual being. This is particularly true of the nature images, which forcibly associate the erotic sensations Leduc describes with a blurring of rigid distinctions between self and non-self. The significance of this dissolution is highlighted by the fact that it is actively desired by Thérèse, as she and Isabelle become aroused:

Je ne suis que moi-même. C'est trop peu. Je ne suis pas une forêt. Un brin d'herbe dans mes cheveux, un confetti dans les plis de mon tablier, une coccinelle entre mes doigts, un duvet dans mon cou, une cicatrice à la joue m'étofferaient. Pourquoi ne suis-je pas la chevelure de saule pour sa main qui caresse mes cheveux? [...] Je modelais son épaule, je voulais pour elle des caresses campagnardes, je désirais sous ma main une épaule houleuse, une écorce. Elle fermait mon poing, elle lissait un galet. (pp. 8–9)

The osmotic mingling of self and world suggested by Leduc's metaphors may simply reflect the fact that, as Bataille observes, the essence of eroticism, for all human beings, 'est de substituer à l'isolement de l'être, à sa discontinuité, un sentiment de continuité profonde'.⁸⁵ Arguably, however, the central place occupied within her novella by images of pleasure that emphasize a confusion of the boundaries of self and non-self means that in her text Leduc evolves a poetic representation of a specifically *feminine* experience of the erotic. As we saw in the opening part of this chapter, woman — according to Hélène Cixous at least — is more open to that which is 'other', is less self-contained and closed

off from the 'different', the 'outside', than man: 'La femme admet qu'il y ait de l'autre. Elle n'a pas effacé, dans son devenir-femme, la bisexualité latente chez la fille comme chez le garçon. [. . .] A l'homme, il est beaucoup plus difficile de se laisser traverser par de l'autre'.⁸⁶ We may attribute this 'openness', as Cixous does, to the enduring 'bisexuality' of the female subject, or, in Chodorowian mode, link it to the feminine ego boundary blurring/fluidity that is engendered by the complexities of mother/daughter bonding. Either way, it seems likely that if woman is able to 'se laisser traverser par de l'autre', as Cixous argues, then this facet of her nature will affect her sexuality, her relation to the erotic. In the light of this, sexual *language* which stresses, as Leduc's does, images of flux and dissolution and emphasizes an intermingling of self and non-self, a 'breaking down of boundaries, [a] fluidity whereby microcosm and macrocosm exchange places', may justifiably be taken to constitute what Alicia Ostriker (who notes the prevalence of such motifs in erotic writing by American women poets) has described as a 'gynocentric erotics'.⁸⁷ By creating a poetic discourse whose metaphors of pantheistic fusion embody what is possibly the core of woman's different erotic experience, Leduc may be said to evolve an *écriture féminine*.

A further justification for likening Leduc's language to an *écriture féminine* lies in the aural effects created within her narrative by the figure of metaphor. According to Cixous, 'woman-speak' is marked by an oral quality which is a consequence of the bond that exists between a woman's language and the voice/body of the mother, with which she never quite loses touch: 'Dans la parole féminine comme dans l'écriture ne cesse jamais de résonner ce qui de nous avoir jadis traversé, touché imperceptiblement, profondément, garde le pouvoir de nous affecter, le *chant*, la première musique, celle de la première voix d'amour, que toute femme préserve vivante'.⁸⁸ In *L'Écriture-Femme*, Béatrice Didier, like Cixous, isolates an oral or musical style as characteristic of a specifically feminine discourse:

Or, précisément, [le] rapport à la littérature orale, [l'] "oralitude" (le mot est bien laid, tout au plus a-t-il l'avantage d'écarter les équivoques de l'"oralité"), est précisément un élément très positif de [la] spécificité féminine. Ecrire n'apparaîtra plus à la femme comme une sorte de trahison par rapport à la parole si elle sait créer une écriture telle que le flux de la parole s'y retrouve, avec ses soubresauts, ses ruptures et ses cris.⁸⁹

Didier suggests moreover that it is metaphorical language in particular which permits the creation of the 'oral' *écriture* she and Cixous associate with linguistic/discursive femininity:

Le recours au style figuré prend alors un sens très particulier. J-J Rousseau avait bien vu que l'usage de la métaphore dans le texte écrit est un moyen de lui rendre cette chaleur, cette vie de la voix et du chant premiers . . . C'est qu'il savait bien que la voix fondamentale est maternelle. L'image dans l'écriture féminine renoue tout

spontanément avec la tradition orale et permet au texte écrit de demeurer parlé ou chanté.⁹⁰

Leduc's figurative descriptions of erotic sensation frequently possess a musical character which seems to endorse Didier's argument that not only is there an intimate link, in women's writing, between metaphor and musicality/*oralité*, but that the former somehow gives rise to the latter. Leduc's images do not merely consist of evocative word pictures; they are also, simultaneously, sound pictures. Some are marked by alliteration ('Des tenailles me torturaient, mollement, mollement', pp. 13–14; 'Ce déferlement de douceur me finit', p. 32; 'Le plaisir sévère se propagea dans les pétales', p. 101; 'J'avais été frôlée par l'écharpe de la folie', p. 107). Others display assonance ('Le printemps dans sa toison fraternisait avec le printemps dans ma toison', p. 17; 'J'ai de la charpie dans les mollets, de l'espalier j'ai le poids de l'été', p. 99). As some of the above indicate, her metaphors are also characterized by a subtle rhyming, rhythmic harmony ('Vivantes, allongées, flottantes, séparées, nous pouvions croire au repos éternel', p. 23; 'deux gorges s'élancèrent, quatre foyers de douceurs irradièrent', p. 95; 'Mes yeux entendaient, mes oreilles voyaient', p. 101; 'Je fus tendue de gris. Mes jambes faiblirent dans leur paradis', p. 102). The metaphoricity of Leduc's erotic discourse indubitably bestows upon it the (feminine) 'privilege of the *voix*'⁹¹ which a more prosaic or intellectual form of language, a direct, non-figurative discourse, would stifle. In consequence, her sustained employment of metaphor can be viewed as an attempt to come closer, in her account of feminine eroticism, to a 'feminine' form of language in which, as Cixous puts it, '*écriture et voix se tressent, se trament*'.⁹²

Metaphor does not, however, simply infuse language with the oral quality Didier and Cixous associate with *écriture féminine*. More importantly, it forces a single word or phrase to convey simultaneously — and *incongruously* — literal and figurative levels of meaning, and is therefore predicated upon what Ricœur calls 'a semantic clash'.⁹³ Consequently, the trope introduces into discourse an element of contradiction, and generates within it a capacity for ambiguity and multivalence. As Donald Davidson explains, 'whether or not metaphor depends on new or extended meanings, it certainly depends in some way on original meanings; an adequate account of metaphor must allow that the primary or original meanings of words remain active in their metaphorical setting. Perhaps, then, we can explain metaphor as a kind of ambiguity: in the context of a metaphor certain words have either a new or an original meaning, and the force of the metaphor depends on our uncertainty as we waver between the two meanings'.⁹⁴ This is particularly true when, as in the case of Leduc's images (for example 'La vague vint en éclair, elle grisa nos pieds, elle se reprit', p. 32, or 'J'avais de la griserie en pleine pâte, j'avais un gazouillis d'épices, je m'élargissais jusqu'aux hanches', p. 101), the metaphor in question

comes into being through 'simple replacement', i.e. via the absolute substitution of a (surprising) vehicle/metaphor for the tenor/proper term ('gazouillis d'épices' or 'de la griserie en pleine pâte' for 'plaisir sexuel', for instance).⁹⁵ The link between metaphor on the one hand and disruptive ambiguity on the other (a quality absent from, and 'hostile' to, the univocal, rational language Irigaray and Cixous categorize as phallogentric/morphic)⁹⁶ helps us to understand more clearly why metaphor has been perceived — by Cixous, at least — as an integral element of *écriture féminine*, and encourages us to read *Thérèse et Isabelle* as an example of this kind of *écriture*. The fact that the trope can generate a 'vast potential of meanings',⁹⁷ and is therefore emblematic of the heterogeneity which French feminism has associated with woman's body, her libidinal make-up and her 'parole', renders the bond Cixous establishes between metaphor and 'feminine-gendered' discourse all the more comprehensible.

In summary, Leduc's metaphorical discourse of female pleasure corresponds to my definition of what a 'feminine' language might entail in a number of ways. Its allusive and elusive nature, together with the emphasis its images place upon boundary dissolution, may be read as a sign that it represents authentically that which has been obscured in masculinist culture, i.e. the reality of female erotic sensation. Secondly, its musicality and its multivalent, disruptive character can, like its elliptical aspect, be taken as evidence of a stylistic/syntactical specificity that is, arguably, 'sexué féminin'. In other words, the fact that Leduc's poetic text pre-dated the theoretical writings of women like Cixous and Irigaray does not prevent it from having features in common with the type of discourse their works indicate to be a 'langage autre'. In the light of this, it seems justifiable, up to a point, to interpret *Thérèse et Isabelle* as an example of *écriture féminine*, produced by Leduc in response to her awareness of the masculine-gendered character of (erotic) language, as well as of *écriture féministe*.

This kind of approach to Leduc's novel, although attractive, poses certain problems however. For a start, because she 'borrows' in such an obvious (albeit ironic) fashion from existing, male-authored works which deal with lesbianism, and because the nature imagery she employs in order to convey *jouissance* is conventionally associated with women and with feminine sexuality, her text remains too close to the traditional/masculine literary order to allow a categorical assertion of its discursive *féminité*.⁹⁸ Secondly, *Thérèse et Isabelle* shows insufficient evidence of the syntactical 'bouleversement' Irigaray advocates, and is far from constituting the kind of avant-garde work she apparently has in mind when she talks of an 'autre écriture'.⁹⁹ Thirdly, the subversive/feminine potential or a language that is so reliant upon the figure of metaphor needs to be (re)considered carefully. If Cixous privileges the trope because it 'smashes' (phallic) language, Irigaray views it with a greater degree of circumspection. In

Speculum, analysing woman's relation to metaphoricity, to the codes with which language surrounds the feminine, she presents the female 'subject' as being 'enfoui sous toutes ces métaphores survalorisantes ou dénigrantes', as stifling beneath '[des] revêtements dont le "sujet" habille, pudiquement, le "féminin"',¹⁰⁰ i.e. as a victim of what are essentially and inevitably deforming projections of the masculine imaginary. Moreover, as Margaret Whitford explains, Irigaray links metaphor — a trope of substitution, in which the vehicle replaces the tenor, rather than of contiguity — to a patriarchal/masculine economy, whose basis is the son's (usurpatory) identification with the father and the 'movement of metaphoric substitution' which subtends that identification.¹⁰¹ In other words, Irigaray views metaphor as part and parcel of a dominant phallic order, and as a 'phallic' trope.¹⁰² Metaphor dominates *Thérèse et Isabelle*, as we have seen. We are by no means obliged to accept an Irigarayan reading of metaphoricity, but if we do, then it is questionable whether we can go on attaching the label *écriture féminine* to Leduc's figurative discourse of *jouissance*. A further, major difficulty arises from the fact that, even if we conclude that her novella is polysemic, plural, and 'indeterminate' enough to justify a defence of its textual *féminité*, the whole concept of a separate, feminine aesthetics is hugely problematic. As numerous critics have argued, this notion is undermined by the fact that it is male rather than female authors who have tended to produce the type of writing in question. Moreover, as Rita Felski succinctly argues in her critique of the arbitrary, ahistorical character of much 1970s feminist theory, 'it is impossible to make a convincing case for the claim that there is anything inherently feminine or feminist in experimental writing as such; if one examines the texts of *l'écriture féminine*, for example, the only gender-specific elements exist on the level of content'.¹⁰³ In the light of this, however tempted we might be to restrict ourselves to the type of reading I have outlined so far, it seems both appropriate and necessary to find another way of understanding Leduc's discursive project, and specifically her recourse to a poetic form of language.

TRANSLATIONAL WRITING

('J'écrivais [...] pour les traduire, pour ne pas les trahir.')

Numerous metatextual observations contained in *La Folie en tête* suggest that Leduc felt that the writer's task was to translate into words, as accurately as possible, his or her experience of the world, to make palpable the precise nature of an urban scene or rural landscape, for example, or to convey the reality and immediacy of particular emotions, sensations, and perceptions. On one level, therefore, her search for the *mot juste* undoubtedly involved a quest after a form of language which, she believed, would act as a window onto the world — a belief which seems curiously outmoded today. She was convinced,

however, that most writers, herself included, fail to produce 'translational', referential discourse, that they betray the realities they endeavour to evoke, and that this betrayal stems in part from the inadequacy of a linguistic medium which cannot embrace the richness, strangeness and unique character of the phenomena it is employed to describe:

Tendres nuances au ciel les premiers jours de mars, du côté de la Nation ...
Revenez en décembre mes innocentes, revenez en janvier mes suaves, laissez vous
prendre, je vais vous qualifier, je vais vous exploiter, je vais vous détruire puisque
je vais vous trahir, tendres nuances au ciel, du côté de la Nation ... (*La Folie*,
pp. 52-53)

Ecrire, en y réfléchissant, est malhonnête, nous trahissons. Nous trahissons quoi?
Tout, tout ce qui est. Les choses, les êtres, les objets. Ils sont plus grands que nos
suppositions. Nous ne pouvons pas forcer le silence d'une carrière de sable la nuit.
(p. 87)

Ma plume n'est pas un pur-sang, elle ne franchit pas les obstacles des mots. (p. 16)

Leduc's awareness of linguistic *trahison*, of the impossibility of depicting the world in words which do not deform it, became acute when she sought to transcribe aspects of feminine sexuality and, concomitantly, to convey her own experience of *jouissance*. This, as one analyst of French erotic poetry has observed, may reflect the fact that the representation of eros, more than any other form of representation, forces the writer to confront the limitations we discover within language when we use it to reproduce reality:

De la description des serpents troublés par le bâton de Tirésias chez Malifâtre aux raisins sucés par le Faune de Mallarmé, la question de la représentation du corps érotique se confond avec la question des rapports entre parole et réalité, au point qu'on peut former l'hypothèse qu'il existerait une étroite analogie entre ces deux instances, et que savoir ce qu'un poète retient d'un corps serait du même coup préciser son rapport à la réalité. [...] Tout se passe comme si le corps érotisé jouait le rôle d'une métaphore du réel, comme si la représentation érotique était une figure de la représentation de la réalité. De même que cette dernière ne sera jamais que l'objet du *désir* du langage, de même l'éros ne sera-t-il jamais qu'*approché* par les ressources de la poésie.¹⁰⁴

The nature of the obstacle language constitutes for the writer who, like Leduc, endeavours to translate *le réel* is illuminated by Henri Bergson in his *Essai sur les données de la conscience immédiate* (1889), which deals with the question of mental/emotional reality and the way we give an account of it. In this essay, the difficulties faced by the individual who tries to communicate private experiences in the public medium of words are analysed extensively. According to Bergson, there is a gulf between the unique, shifting world of perception, feeling and sensation that exists within each of us and the reifying words we employ in order to grasp and represent that world:

[...] nos perceptions, sensations, émotions et idées se présentent sous un double aspect: l'un net, précis, mais impersonnel; l'autre confus, infiniment mobile, et inexprimable, parce que le langage ne saurait le saisir sans en fixer la mobilité, ni l'adapter à sa forme banale sans le faire tomber dans le domaine commun.¹⁰⁵

Bergson implies here that the opaque, impersonal, unequivocal character of language means that it must involve a betrayal of that which it is supposed to translate. He argues that when we use it in order to understand and articulate our experiences and perceptions, we inevitably find ourselves 'en présence de l'ombre de nous-mêmes: nous croyons avoir analysé notre sentiment, nous lui avons substitué en réalité une juxtaposition d'états inertes, traduisibles en mots, et qui constituent chacun l'élément commun, le résidu par conséquent impersonnel, des impressions ressenties dans un cas donné par la société entière'.¹⁰⁶ His position here is clearly a pessimistic one.

In *Le Rire* (1900), however, in which he explores the nature of creativity, Bergson indicates that artists are uniquely capable of conveying those realities which language, acting as a kind of veil, normally obscures or falsifies. Whereas in the *Essai* he casts doubt upon the possibility of communicating individual emotions in words, in this later work he suggests that creative beings who use language *poetically can* achieve this, because they are somehow 'detached' enough to see and express that which the 'commonality' of language conceals. For Bergson, the function of art is therefore revelatory:

Sous les mille actions naissantes qui dessinent au dehors un sentiment, derrière le mot banal et social qui exprime et recouvre un état d'âme, c'est le sentiment, c'est l'état d'âme [que les poètes] iront chercher simple et pur. Et, pour nous induire à tenter le même effort sur nous-mêmes, ils s'ingénieront à nous faire voir quelque chose de ce qu'ils auront vu: par des arrangements rythmés de mots, qui arrivent ainsi à s'organiser ensemble et à s'animer d'une vie originale, ils nous disent, ou plutôt ils nous suggèrent, des choses que le langage n'était pas fait pour exprimer.¹⁰⁷

Bergson is distinguishing here between ordinary language, which serves only as a medium of practical communication, and poetry, which 'conveys individual moods and thoughts, by means of giving language a musical quality and thereby suggesting what it is not in the nature of ordinary language to be able to convey'.¹⁰⁸ His remarks offer insights into why Leduc found language a problem, and enable us to understand differently the nature of the discourse she creates in *Thérèse et Isabelle*. Although evidently troubled by the barriers erected by the genderization of the linguistic/creative sphere, her comments regarding the 'dishonesty' of language/writing indicate that she was exercised to a greater degree by the very issue Bergson raises in his *Essai*, i.e. the unsatisfactory *décalage* between our consciousness of the richness which characterizes *le réel* and our responses to it and the (limited) words we use in order to evoke this richness. In consequence, we can interpret the lyrical

discourse contained in her novella less as an attempt to disrupt the 'masculinity' of the symbolic than as an assault upon the domination of language by 'mots banaux et sociaux' which cannot fully express the unique sexual ecstasy she and her lesbian heroines experienced. Leduc's development of a poetic mode of expression may, in other words, be read as evidence of her efforts to remedy the betrayals imposed upon the writer by a language which, in its normal form, is fit only for humdrum communication and is incapable of the kind of elevated translational function she required it to perform.

The discourse Leduc evolves in *Thérèse et Isabelle* corresponds to the Bergsonian vision of revelatory art in various ways. Firstly, her employment of alliteration, assonance and rhythm gives it precisely the kind of musicality and animation he recommends. Moreover, the hermetic, unusual character of some of her metaphors of pleasure ('Une musique orientale serpentait dans mes os', p. 98; 'la pieuvre refaisait son travail d'accrochage', 'Notre chair nous aimait, notre odeur giclait. Notre levain, nos bulles, notre pain', p. 32, for example), together with the fact that she employs the nouns 'plaisir' 'sensation' and 'orgasme', and the verb 'jouir' only sixteen times in the course of her novella,¹⁰⁹ means that her discourse is consistently allusive instead of directly denominational and, in Bergsonian terms at least, becomes therefore truly 'translational':

Ainsi, qu'il soit peinture, sculpture, poésie ou musique, l'art n'a d'autre objet que d'écartier les symboles pratiquement utiles, les généralités conventionnellement et socialement acceptées, enfin tout ce qui masque la réalité, pour nous mettre face à face à la réalité même.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, it is debatable whether, in developing this kind of language, Leduc succeeded in overcoming linguistic opacity/banality and in translating, as adequately as she wished, private erotic reality. She herself was convinced that she had failed to realize her (unrealizable?) project. In *La Folie en tête*, she describes the sense of disappointment that overcame her as she finished the first version of *Thérèse et Isabelle* and confronted the degree to which the language of her text continued to misrepresent her subject matter:

J'ai écrit trois heures par jour *Thérèse et Isabelle* avec la chevelure-fleuve d'Isabelle dans ma bouche. Ce qu'Isabelle m'a apporté, ce que je lui ai donné, je l'ai rendu à mon cahier. J'ai sacrifié ma tenue et mes principes, c'était l'amour de ce que je voulais décrire. Je voulais tout dire, j'ai tout dit. C'est seulement en cela que je n'ai pas échoué. Mon texte est plein d'images. C'est dommage. Mes roses, mes nuages, ma pieuvre, mes feuilles de lilas, ma mouture, mon paradis du pourrissement, je ne les renie pas. Je visais à plus de précision, j'espérais des mots suggestifs et non des comparaisons approximatives. (pp. 350–51)

Leduc is implying here that even an elusive, suggestive discourse (of the kind she was clearly already employing to describe woman's *jouissance* in the mid-fifties and which finds its most complete form in the 1966 version of

Thérèse et Isabelle) may not enable the writer to give an accurate, 'transparent' account of individual, non-recurring or extreme experience. Indeed, she seems to indicate that while any attempt to do so necessitates a sustained use of images, these images themselves exacerbate the *trahison* inherent in language. She returns to this notion in her 1966 interview with Démeron, associating once again her failure to infuse erotic sensation into the language of her novella with the 'abus d'images' contained in that language ('J'avais une ambition: je voulais "fixer" mes sensations. C'est impossible, je n'y suis pas parvenue. [. . .] C'est pour cela qu'il y a peut-être un abus d'images, de comparaisons, peut-être de mauvaise poésie').¹¹¹ Leduc herself, therefore, seems both to endorse a Bergsonian vision of poetry as the means by which translational language may come into being and, paradoxically, to view her own poetic discourse as still inadequate to the task.

Leduc's preoccupation with questions of *style* ('Mourir en écrivant. Le style. L'hermétisme d'un style. La clarté d'un style. Les largesses d'un style. Lui donner ma peau, au style')¹¹² which is much in evidence in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, also suggests that she did not create (and was not, perhaps, in genuine pursuit of) a uniquely translational mode of expression. The poetic delicacy of many of her images, and the striking semantic combinations she introduces into her text (exemplified, for instance, by the phrase 'Infiltrations de langueur, lézardes de délices, marécages de sounoiseries . . . Les feuilles de lilas déroulaient leur douceur, le printemps me mettait à l'agonie, la poussière des morts dansait dans ma lumière', p. 106) reveal the extent of her self-confessed need to produce language which was formally distinctive as well as 'transparent'; to 'dire vrai' (i.e. to translate) but also to 'dire autre chose'.¹¹³ She seems to have felt that the development of a stylistically perfect discourse might enable words to become less opaque, and to come closer to conveying the vividness of the real, which is destroyed by more prosaic language: 'Le style, c'est l'encens sur un cadavre. Les mots sont forts pendant que nous les cherchons'.¹¹⁴ Yet her creation of just such a discourse means that *Thérèse et Isabelle* contains a model of language which, by virtue of the formal/poetic *justesse* of many of its *mots*, becomes at times entirely self-referential and displays the 'intransitivity' which, according to Jakobson, is precisely the essence of the poetic ('Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition [. . .] acquire a weight and meaning of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality').¹¹⁵ Leduc's discourse of sexual pleasure is one in which words emerge as important in their own right, rather than as mere windows through which the reader may look onto reality or life. In Barthesian terms, Leduc creates 'un nouvel état philosophal de la matière langagière; cet état inouï, ce métal incandescent, hors origine et hors communication', which ceases merely to be '*un* langage' and becomes instead '*du* langage'; something

that is autonomous and, for Barthes, 'jouissif'.¹¹⁶ Evidently, Leduc's preoccupation with style makes *Thérèse et Isabelle* a success rather than a failure as a work of *literature*. None the less, and in spite of Bergson's association of poetic language with the revelatory or translational, it is arguably the formal perfection of Leduc's narrative which undermines definitively her efforts to *traduire*. This explains perhaps why she came to view style as that which, paradoxically, combines 'clarté' and 'hermétisme'.

It is worth remembering too that, despite Leduc's efforts to create an original text, *Thérèse et Isabelle* can be linked to a broader, historically well-established corpus of erotic writing and cannot therefore be deemed an entirely successful translation of what Leduc believed to be a personal, unique experience of the sensual. The novella, like the majority of erotic narratives, 'remains firmly anchored to certain notions of the formal consummation of intense feeling',¹¹⁷ and is marked by strategies/procedures belonging to (one 'branch' of) the erotico-discursive tradition which has flourished in France since the eighteenth century. In relation to the *galant* 'strand' of this tradition, Guiraud observes:

De même, à l'opposé de la gauloiserie, cette veine galante ne nomme pas directement les choses, mais procède par allusions, plus ou moins voilées. Il en résulte un système d'images conventionnelles et bientôt traditionnelles, une rhétorique — sous laquelle nous vivons toujours — qui a une double origine: humaniste et courtoise.¹¹⁸

Guiraud is suggesting here that the *tradition galante*, which was 'pratiquement fixée à partir du XVIIIe siècle' and produced a 'rhétorique désormais figée',¹¹⁹ represents a euphemistic and highly precious mode of erotic expression — a mode described elsewhere as a discursive convention 'qui avoue la brûlure du désir et interdit la représentation directe de sa volupté, qui suggère l'éros et bride le langage érotique par le jeu des tabous ou plutôt des codes littéraires qui, bien loin de prétendre nommer directement l'éros, se font au contraire un jeu de multiplier les formules obliques d'une préciosité devenue à elle-même son propre but'.¹²⁰ Leduc's non-explicit, figurative erotic language, in which she herself discerned an 'abus d'images', undoubtedly belongs to the tradition Guiraud analyses, in spite of her modifications of conventional codes and metaphors. It seems, at times, *précieux* in the extreme, even ironically so — as if Leduc were articulating, through the (satirical?) employment of ostentatiously recondite or sophisticated metaphors ('ineffable pourriture', 'infiltrations de langueur' and 'lézardes de délices' spring to mind, pp. 102, 106), the impossibility of escaping the *rhétorique figée* Guiraud describes. Like the 'intransitive' aspect of her language, the ties binding *Thérèse et Isabelle* to the (impersonal) rhetorical conventions of the *tradition galante* make it difficult to read her text as a completely authentic 'translation' of what was in essence a private, individual experience of *jouissance*.

In common with other writers of her generation, Leduc was alive to the problems lying in store for the artist who grapples with language in the hope of maximizing its expressive potential. Her particular sense of the restrictions inherent in language may, as I have sought to demonstrate, be interpreted from a feminist and from a Bergsonian perspective. Moreover, the kind of discourse she evolves in *Thérèse et Isabelle* can be read as 'political'/feminist in nature, as an attempt at the production of a kind of textual *féminité*, and as an effort to rid language of its opaque, generalized banality so that it might say something new and revealing about the reality of specific, individual experiences and sensations. The presence, in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, of instances of *écriture féministe* seems clear. Ultimately, however, it is impossible to assert categorically that Leduc creates either an *écriture féminine* or an *écriture transparente/traductrice* in her novella. In the final analysis, is this so important? What counts is the beauty and strength of the text she produced, and the courage that accompanied its production, a courage which means that her writing merits a place alongside that of those better known French women writers — Colette, Duras, Beauvoir, Wittig — who have sought to represent women in innovative and ground-breaking ways.

NOTES

1. Kirsten Anderson, 'Towards a New Reason: Guilt, Language and Nature in the work of Roland Barthes and Francis Ponge', in Harry Cockerham and Esther Ehrman (eds), *Ideology and Religion in French Literature — Essays in Honour of Brian Juden* (Porphyrogenitus, 1989), pp. 23–48 (p. 26).
2. Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, pp. 71, 149.
3. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 655.
4. Jacqueline Rose, 'Introduction ii', in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds), *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 38.
5. Deborah Cameron analyses the significance of the phallus and its relationship to language acquisition in the Lacanian schema as follows: 'Because of its function in the castration complex, the phallus is given two very powerful meanings. One of these is lack, for it symbolises the loss of the mother's body. After the prohibition of incest and the threat of castration there can never again be the closeness of mother and child that existed before the introduction of the third term. The other phallic 'meaning' is the Law of patriarchy, a social order in which incest is prohibited and castration threatened by the father. [...] For Lacan, it is precisely the awareness of lack that impels a child toward language. The idea that words can stand for things can only be grasped when the child has some concept of something missing or absent. Thus there can be no language until the mother/child dyad is broken, and language depends on the introjection of the phallus. This is why Lacan claims that the symbolic order is dominated by the phallus' (Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 121).
6. Lacan, *Encore: Le Séminaire XX* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 68.
7. Susan Sellers, *Language and Sexual Difference* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 97.
8. Marcelle Marini, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
9. Lacan, *Encore: Le Séminaire XX*, p. 68.
10. Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p. 145.
11. Irigaray, *ibid.*, p. 77.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
13. Marini, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
14. Fuss, *op. cit.*, pp. 58–59.

15. Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p. 26.
16. Margaret Whitford, 'Lucre Irigaray's Critique of Rationality' in Margaret Whitford and Morwenna Griffiths (eds), *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 109–30 (p. 112).
17. Irigaray, 'Women's Exile', p. 64.
18. Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p. 76.
19. Irigaray, 'Women's Exile', p. 65.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
21. Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p. 24.
22. The notion of 'parler femme' is employed by Irigaray in *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, specifically to describe the kind of discourse which emerges when women speak together: 'Il est sûr qu'avec les-femmes-entre-elles (et c'est un des enjeux des mouvements de libération, quand ils ne s'organisent pas sur le mode du pouvoir masculin, et quand ils ne sont pas dans la revendication de la prise ou du renversement de "pouvoir"), dans ces lieux des femmes-entre-elles, quelque chose s'énonce d'un parler-femme. C'est ce qui explique le désir ou la nécessité de la non-mixité: le langage dominant est si puissant que les femmes n'osent pas parler-femme en dehors d'une non-mixité' (*ibid.*, p. 133).
23. Jane Gallop, 'Quand nos lèvres s'écrivent: Irigaray's Body Politic', *Romanic Review*, 74 (1983), 77–83 (p. 78) (my emphasis).
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79. While Gallop's contention that we must 'beware too literal a reading of Irigarayan anatomy' (*ibid.*, p. 78) and that 'the Irigarayan *poétique du corps* is not an expression of the body but a *poiésis*, a creating of the body' (*ibid.*, p. 79) is an important one, Irigaray's anatomical references do lend themselves to literal interpretations — as Gallop herself acknowledges.
25. Irigaray, 'Is the Subject of Science Sexed', *Cultural Critique*, 1 (1985), 73–88 (p. 84).
26. Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p. 28.
27. Cixous claims that exceptional beings of both sexes, beings who are open to otherness, can write bisexually: 'Il y a des exceptions. Il y en a toujours eu, ce sont des êtres incertains, poétiques, qui ne se sont pas laissés réduire à l'état de mannequins codés par le refoulement impitoyable de la composante homosexuelle. Hommes ou femmes, êtres complexes, mobiles, ouverts. D'admettre la composante de l'autre sexe les rend à la fois beaucoup plus riches, plusieurs, forts et dans la mesure de cette mobilité, très fragiles. [...] Ainsi sous le nom de Jean Genêt, ce qui s'inscrit dans le mouvement d'un texte qui se divise. se met en pièces, se remembre, c'est une féminité foisonnante, maternelle' (Cixous, *La Jeune Née* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1975), pp. 153–54).
28. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
31. Monique Plaza argues that Irigaray adopts a resolutely essentialist/naturalistic position because her writings suggest that 'all that "is" woman comes to her in the last instance from her anatomical sex, which touches itself all the time' (Plaza, "'Phallomorphic Power" and the Psychology of "Woman"', *Ideology and Consciousness*, 4 (1978), 4–36 (p. 32)). Toril Moi refers to Cixous's biologism and suggests that although she seems to adopt a deconstructive, anti-essentialist stance in her accounts of woman's discourse, this stance 'is opposed and undercut by a vision of woman's writing steeped in the very metaphysics of presence she claims she is out to unmask' (Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 110).
32. Leduc's desire to 'fixer' and 'traduire' and her faith in the 'mot juste' suggest that she held the (old-fashioned) view that the relationship between elements of reality — whether it be that of the external world or that of feeling and emotion — and the words used to evoke them can be a stable/'fit' one. Yet, as Terence Hawkes points out, Saussurean linguistics demonstrates the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, and reveals that 'there exists no necessary "fitness" in the link between the sound-image, or signifier "tree", the concept, or signified that it involves, and the actual physical tree growing in the earth' (Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 25).
33. Interview with Pierre Descargues, *Tribune de Lausanne*, 18 October 1964, p. 8.
34. Interview with Madeleine Chapsal, *L'Express*, 19 October 1964, pp. 70–71 (p. 71).
35. Colette avoids explicit descriptions of women's pleasure, particularly lesbian pleasure, explaining in *Le Pur et l'impur* that she does so because of taboos surrounding feminine homoeroticism: 'On trouvera que je fais la part petite au févreur plaisir, dans ce chapitre où passent et repassent, liées par paires, des femmes. C'est, d'abord, parce que le libertinage saphique est le seul qui soit inacceptable. Il n'y aura jamais assez de blâme sur les saphos de

- rencontre, celle du restaurant, du dancing, du train bleu et du trottoir, celle qui provoque, qui rit au lieu de soupirer. Il n'y aura jamais trop de crépuscule ménagé, de silence et de gravité sur une étreinte de femmes' (Colette, *Œuvres complètes*, 9 (Paris: Flammarion, 1949), pp. 5–137 (pp. 91–92)). Elaine Marks stresses Colette's reticence: 'Unlike her successors in the examination of the "dark continent" of female sexuality, Violette Leduc or Monique Wittig, Colette does not focus on love-making or the celebration of the female body. [...] Women who love women come together in Colette's world because they are fleeing from a painful experience with a man and are looking for a *retraite sentimentale*' (Marks, 'Lesbian Intertextuality', in Marks and Stambolian (eds), op. cit., pp. 353–77 (p. 369)).
36. Interview with Pierre Démeron, *Candide*, 5–11 September 1966, pp. 35–37 (p. 36).
 37. Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p. 75.
 38. Ibid.
 39. Marie Cardinal, *Autrement Dit* (Paris: Livre de poche, 1977), p. 89.
 40. Irigaray, 'Women's Exile', p. 62.
 41. Hélène Cixous, 'Entretien avec Françoise van Rossum-Guyon', *Revue des Sciences humaines*, 44 (1977), 479–93 (p. 485).
 42. Guiraud argues that (French) erotic language is particularly marked by the masculine, and implies that this renders it infinitely less accessible to women: 'Il est bon de relever — c'est un fait culturel considérable et qui dépasse notre sujet — que [la] représentation de la sexualité et le langage qui en découle est [...] d'origine entièrement masculine. Ces images et ces mots reflètent une expérience qui, à de rares exceptions près, est vécue et traduite uniquement par des hommes' (Guiraud, op. cit., p. 113).
 43. See, for example, Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank* (London: Virago, 1987); Jeanette Foster, *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (Tallahassee: Naiad Press, 1985); Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: The Women's Press, 1985); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land 2: Sexchanges* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989); Elaine Marks, 'Lesbian Intertextuality'.
 44. Foster talks of Diderot's 'clinical accuracy' and described *La Religieuse* as 'a landmark in the literature of female sex variance' (Foster, op. cit., p. 55).
 45. 'While Diderot the Encyclopedist urged greater freedom and self-determination for man, he did not urge the same for woman. The idea of a society ruled entirely by them, the convent, was probably as distasteful to him for that reason as it was for more progressive political and philosophical reasons. In a convent, women were almost entirely self-sufficient, and the head of the community was another woman. [...] To Diderot, the convent was a place where the blind led the blind, and where the depraved led the innocent into perversity. It was the one French institution where women, who were at best incapable children, actually ruled' (Faderman, op. cit., p. 45).
 46. See 'The Rise of Antifeminism' in Faderman, op. cit., pp. 233–38.
 47. Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Volume One, Sexual Inversion* (Watford: London University Press, 1897), pp. 99–100.
 48. Marks, 'Lesbian Intertextuality', p. 361.
 49. Benstock, op. cit., p. 51.
 50. Colette, op. cit., pp. 105–06.
 51. Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 59.
 52. For an account of the link the image of the 'femme damnée' establishes between Diderot and Baudelaire, see Georges May, 'Diderot, Baudelaire et les femmes damnées', *Modern Language Notes* (June 1950), pp. 395–99, and Antoine Adam (ed.), in Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Garnier: Paris, 1961), pp. 411–13. The image originates from the words Suzanne overhears her lesbian superior address to her confessor: 'Mon père, je suis damnée ...' (Diderot, *La Religieuse* (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), p. 198).
 53. It seems likely that Leduc knew the works of all three writers well. As her autobiographies indicate, she was an avid reader of Proust. Her decision to entitle her original draft of *Ravages*, which included the first version of *Thérèse et Isabelle*, *Les Verts Paradis* suggests that she was also familiar with Baudelaire's poetry, since his 'Mœsta et Errabunda' evokes 'le vert paradis des amours enfantines'. There are no direct references to Diderot in Leduc's autobiographical writing. However, the intertextual parallels that bind *Thérèse et Isabelle* to *La Religieuse* and Leduc's explicit dismissal of the lesbian/'femme damnée' association, which Diderot establishes, indicate that she must have read it.
 54. Diderot, op. cit., p. 169.

55. Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard (Pléiade), 1961), pp. 134–39. All the page references for Baudelaire in the main body of my text come from this edition.
56. Claude Pichois (ed.), in Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard (Pléiade), 1975), p. 1061.
57. The lesbianism/vampirism link signals a (masculine) rejection of the authenticity of feminine homoeroticism and of the right of lesbians to indulge in violent forms of erotic exchange acceptable within heterosexual sex: 'Derrière cette vision, c'est le refus [...] d'une sexualité qui aurait, parce qu'elle est authentique, ses formes de violence dans l'étroite, sa jouissance propre, même si comme dans l'hétérosexualité elle peut revêtir une composante sado-masochiste [...]' (Claudine Brécourt-Villars, *Petit glossaire raisonné de l'érotisme saphique 1880–1930* (Paris: Pauvert, 1980), p. 34). Faderman notes that, in the first half of the twentieth century, writings on lesbianism by women evidenced a disturbing internalization of the image of the lesbian vampire. These include Clemence Dane's *Regiment of Women* (1915) and Francis Brett Young's *White Ladies* (1935) (Faderman, op. cit., pp. 341–44).
58. In his other '*Femmes damnées*' (*OC*, 1961, pp. 107–08) Baudelaire is less hostile to his lesbian heroines and becomes positively sympathetic, telling them: 'Vous que dans votre enfer mon âme a poursuivies/Pauvres sœurs, je vous aime autant que je vous plains/Pour vos mornes douleurs, vos soifs inassouvies/Et les urnes d'amour dont vos grands cœurs sont pleins!' (p. 108). These lines suggest that Baudelaire's lesbians, like his other sinners, pursue their 'vice' out of a thirst for the infinite (a 'soif inassouvie') stemming from a disgust at the banality of human existence which he shared, and that they are to be admired as much as condemned. According to Antoine Adam, 'dans ces femmes demeurées fidèles aux rites antiques de Sapho [Baudelaire] découvre quelque chose de sacré, de primitif, de mystérieux. Il retrouve en elles [une] quête de l'infini, [une] recherche épuisante et inapaisée d'un *au-delà* de la condition humaine'. See Adam (ed.), *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Garnier, 1961), p. 412. Consequently, the hostility towards Delphine, Hippolyte and the inhabitants of Lesbos present in the other poems I have considered may be interpreted as an (ironic) mimicry of the world's condemnation of lesbianism, rather than a true indication of the poet's own sentiments.
59. Lucienne Frappier-Masur, 'Marginal Canons: Rewriting the Erotic', *Yale French Studies*, 75 (1988), 112–28 (pp. 115–16).
60. – Laisse donc ouvert, j'ai chaud, dit son amie.
– Mais c'est assommant, on nous verra, répondit Mlle Vinteuil.
[...]
– Quand je dis nous voir, je veux dire nous voir lire; c'est assommant, quelque chose insignifiante qu'on fasse, de penser que des yeux nous voient.
Par une générosité instinctive et une politesse involontaire elle taisait les mots prémédités qu'elle avait jugés indispensables à la pleine réalisation de son désir. Et à tous moments au fond d'elle-même une vierge timide et suppliante implorait et faisait reculer un soudard fruste et vainqueur.
– Oui, c'est probable qu'on nous regarde à cette heure-ci dans cette campagne fréquentée, dit ironiquement son amie.
Et puis quoi? ajouta-t-elle (en croyant devoir accompagner d'un clignement d'yeux malicieux et tendre ces mots qu'elle récita par bonté, comme un texte qu'elle savait être agréable à Mlle Vinteuil, d'un ton qu'elle s'efforçait de rendre cynique) "quand même on nous verrait, ce n'en est que meilleur".
61. Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Gallimard (Folio), 1954, p. 190).
61. Randolph Splitter, *Proust's Recherche: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 35.
62. Domna C. Stanton, 'Difference on Trial', in Nancy K. Miller (ed.), *The Poetics of Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 157–82 (p. 172).
63. Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 141. Béatrice Didier suggests that the French literary tradition has treated woman's anatomy analogously: 'Le corps féminin — beaucoup plus que le corps masculin — était, dans la littérature, un corps morcelé. S'il faut bien convenir que le corps masculin est souvent peu présent également dans la littérature, le personnage masculin y conserve cependant l'unité d'un sujet, tandis que le personnage féminin y subit le morcellement de l'objet' (Didier, *L'Écriture-Femme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), p. 36).
64. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), p. 439.
65. Anne-Marie Dardigna, *Les Châteaux d'Eros, ou l'infortune du sexe des femmes* (Paris: Maspéro, 1980), p. 254.

66. Robbe-Grillet, *La Maison de rendez-vous* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1965), p. 9.
67. Dardigna, op. cit., p. 254.
68. Michie, op. cit., pp. 125–26.
69. Martha Noel Evans, *The Masks of Tradition*, pp. 200–01.
70. 'Male homosexual literature has a past, it has a present. The lesbians, for their part, are silent — just as all women are as women at all levels. When one has read the poems of Sappho, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, the poems of Sylvia Plath and Anais Nin, *La Bâtarde* by Violette Leduc, one has read everything.' (Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body* (preface), trans. David LeVay (New York: William Morrow, 1975), p. 9.)
71. Diane Crowder, 'Amazons and Mothers', *Contemporary Literature*, 24 (1983), 117–44 (p. 121). This article contrasts the approaches Cixous and Wittig take to the relationship between sexuality, gender and discourse.
72. Dardigna, op. cit., p. 133.
73. Irigaray, *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, p. 177.
74. Michie, op. cit., p. 145. I shall return to the issue of feminist reservations regarding metaphor, and its relation to the feminine — which Michie discerns in the work of Adrienne Rich and Audrey Lorde, and which is also present in Wittig and Irigaray — in the next part of this chapter.
75. Kate Millett, op. cit., p. 430.
76. Guiraud, op. cit., p. 113.
77. Irigaray, *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, p. 178.
78. Leduc may have derived her sense of the 'subversive' nature of ellipsis from Colette. A lucid discussion of Colette's manipulation of the unsaid, which argues that it can be interpreted, despite the capitulation to social censorship it represents, as a feminine ploy destined to disrupt, is provided by Sherry Dranch: 'Colette is obscure on the topic of female sexuality, and yet her text demands that one perceive what lies beyond her subterfuges. Since the unsaid in a literary text is established in contrast to what is said, we can detect the features, the contours, of the unsaid by identifying patterns of ellipses, through a hermeneutic reading of a censored style. Ellipses are the connection [...] between Colette's style — the subliminal style of the flesh — and a forbidden obsession. A sub-text, consisting of the clearly-stated unsaid, or more precisely of an "inter-said" [interdit: veiled] is indicated through ellipsis and metaphor [...] (Dranch, 'Reading through the Veiled Text: Colette's *The Pure and The Impure*', *Contemporary Literature*, 24 (1983), 176–89 (p. 177)).
79. Michèle Montrelay, 'Recherches sur la féminité', *Critique* (July 1970), pp. 654–74 (p. 666).
80. Marcelle Marini, op. cit., p. 69.
81. Irigaray, *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, pp. 176–77.
82. Not all Durassian critics accept Marini's reading of ellipsis. Trista Selous comments: 'I do not think such a way of using language can be called specifically "feminine" in itself; for it works in the same way as innuendo or jokes, by controlling and using the power of unconscious links between signifiers, and I do not see why or how such universally found phenomena can be gendered. Furthermore, I do not think it is possible to see [Duras's blanks] as disrupting the rules by which (masculine) language or literature works' (Selous, *The Other Woman: Feminism and Femininity in the Work of Marguerite Duras* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 137).
83. Cixous, 'Rethinking Differences', p. 71.
84. 'At the time we were all writing erotica at a dollar a page, I realized that for centuries we had had only one model for this literary genre — the writing of men. I was already conscious of a difference between the masculine and feminine treatments of sexual experience. I knew there was a great disparity between Henry Miller's explicitness and my ambiguities — between his humorous, Rabelaisian view of sex and my poetic descriptions of sexual relationships [...]. As I wrote in volume three of the *Diary*, I had a feeling that Pandora's box [poetry] contained the mysteries of woman's sensuality, so different from man's, and for which man's language was inadequate.' (Anais Nin, *Delta of Venus* (London: W. H. Allen, 1978), pp. 13–14.)
85. Bataille, op. cit., p. 21.
86. Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 158.
87. Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: the Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (London: The Women's Press, 1986), pp. 174, 166.
88. Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 172.
89. Didier, op. cit., p. 32.
90. Ibid.

91. Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 170.
92. Ibid.
93. Ricœur, 'The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination and Feeling' in Sheldon Sacks (ed.), *On Metaphor* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 141–57 (p. 144).
94. Donald Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', in *ibid.*, pp. 29–45 (pp. 32–33). Winifred Nowotny concurs, commenting that ambiguity 'is now associated with such concepts as ambivalence, tension, paradox and irony, and with interest in metaphor and symbol as means by which the poet can evade or transcend unequivocal assertion' (*The Language Poets Use* (London: The Athlone Press, 1962), p. 147).
95. 'Ambiguity is, of course, the great strength of metaphor by Simple Replacement, and I am not suggesting that we have to decode it into one specific proper term and one only'. (Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Grammar of Metaphor* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958), pp. 28–29.)
96. In 'The Epistemology of Metaphor', Paul de Man examines the 'damage' metaphor specifically inflicts upon philosophico-rational (i.e. univocal, 'phallogentric/morphic') language: 'Metaphors, tropes, and figural language in general have been a perennial problem and, at times, a recognized source of embarrassment for philosophical discourse and, by extension, for all discursive uses of language, including historiography and literary analysis' (de Man, in Sacks, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–18 (p. 11)). He goes on to explain that Locke, who wrote 'An Essay concerning Human Understanding' in order to condemn the employment of rhetorical devices, associated metaphor etc. with femininity. According to de Man, Locke's argument is that 'it is clear that rhetoric is something one can decorously indulge in as long as one knows where it belongs. Like a woman, which it resembles [. . .], it is a fine thing as long as it is kept in its proper place. Out of place, among the serious affairs of men [. . .], it is a disruptive scandal' (*ibid.*, p. 13).
97. Nowotny, *op. cit.*, p. 162.
98. 'Because the gynaceum and schoolgirl love are so heavily invested with intertextual connotations and because Violette Leduc uses traditional nature codes for metaphoric support, *Thérèse et Isabelle* is not nearly as original or as disturbing a text as *Le Corps lesbien*.' (Elaine Marks, 'Lesbian Intertextuality', p. 375.)
99. Gallop suggests when she evokes an 'other' kind of language/writing, Irigaray envisages the inscription 'of the multiplicity of the female genitals as a textual production, [. . .] in accord with our modernist conception of writing' (Gallop, 'Quand nos lèvres s'écrivent: Irigaray's Body Politic', p. 79).
100. Irigaray, *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, p. 177.
101. Margaret Whitford, *Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 180.
102. Whitford (*ibid.*) explains that if metaphor represents, for Irigaray, an emblem of the masculine economy/genealogy, metonymy, predicated on contiguity, on 'that which touches, associates or combines' instead of substitution/replacement, signifies in Irigarayan terms 'a figure for the vertical and horizontal relationships between women, the maternal genealogy and the relation of sisterhood' and stands for a different/feminine economy. There is a close link, in Irigaray's work, between metonymy and the motif of the 'two lips', which Irigaray associates variously with women's autoeroticism and with her (unacknowledged) love of the self/same.
103. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 5.
104. John E. Jackson, *Le Corps amoureux* (Neuchâtel: A La Baconnière, 1986), p. 13.
105. Henri Bergson, *Œuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), pp. 85–86.
106. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
107. *Ibid.*, pp. 461–62.
108. Anthony Pilkington, *Bergson and his Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 14.
109. See pp. 98, 100, 32, 23, 52, 53, 56, 76, 78, 101, 102, 107, 111.
110. Bergson, *op. cit.*, p. 462.
111. *Candide*, 5 September 1966, p. 36.
112. *La Folie en tête*, p. 117.
113. *La Chasse à l'amour*, p. 46.
114. *Ibid.*, p. 295.
115. Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 378.
116. Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
117. Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination' in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 83–118 (p. 96).

118. Guiraud, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
119. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
120. Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 27.