

## CONCLUSION

What kind of a writer is Violette Leduc? What view of her creative skills does a close reading of *L'Asphyxie*, *Ravages* and *Thérèse et Isabelle* afford us?

Firstly, these texts show that Leduc was able to understand and represent the intricacies of female relationships in a remarkable way. Readers may come to differing conclusions regarding the 'femininity' of her discourse, but it is undoubtedly the case that Leduc offers us a 'distinctly female vision' of the way in which familial and sexual bonds between women work.<sup>1</sup> What is perhaps most significant about her account of these bonds is that it illuminates the 'perfect moments' they can engender, even as it reveals the difficulty of achieving such moments, and highlights their transitory, (irretrievably) archaic, or fantasmic character. We are left with the feeling that Leduc never loses sight of the possibility that an ineffable, strife-free feminine union might exist, even if the odds are stacked against its realization. For all the bleakness of much of her writing, the reader senses that Leduc privileges female relationships because, unlike those that obtain between women and men, they do not preclude the chance of happiness.

In the final analysis, can Leduc be viewed as a writer whose work is 'recuperable' for feminism, in the same way that certain women authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Colette, for example) have proved to be? The answer is undoubtedly yes. Whatever ambivalence Leduc may have felt regarding feminist politics, her account of female bonding undermines the state of representational exclusion to which women are subject within patriarchal culture. Irigaray argues that in the symbolic/cultural order as it stands, 'la femme dispose [ . . . ] de trop peu d'images, de figurations, de représentations, pour pouvoir s'y re-présenter'.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, she relates the fact that women have no identity in the symbolic (save that of defective, castrated men, or mothers) to the unsymbolized character of the mother/daughter bond, i.e. to what Margaret Whitford describes as 'an absence of linguistic, social, cultural, iconic, theoretical, mythical, religious, or any other representations of that relationship'.<sup>3</sup> Irigaray's suggestion that the creation of positive conceptualizations of the tie between mothers and daughters (modern versions of the Demeter/Kore myth, for instance)<sup>4</sup> seriously endangers the stability of the patriarchal symbolic order may arouse scepticism, even in feminists. None the less, literary or artistic depictions of joyful relations between women, when they elude enclosure by and within a masculine imaginary, do, arguably, have a

'disruptive' impact. Because Leduc offers us at least one representation of the mother/daughter bond which is not predicated upon the Freudian notion that this union becomes redundant after the intercession of the paternal male, and because she creates, in *Thérèse et Isabelle*, a vision of lesbian relations which escapes containment within a heterosexual/masculine model, she must ultimately be considered a textual feminist, albeit (perhaps) an unconscious one.

What of her formal/discursive achievement? It is apparent in all of the texts I have discussed that Leduc is a stylist of the first order, possessed of the ability to push language far beyond its everyday, 'communicational' limits. Yet her autobiographical works, particularly *La Folie en tête*, reveal the degree to which she doubted her own capacity to overcome 'les obstacles des mots' (*La Folie*, p. 16) and to weave the kind of resonant, formally consummate discourse she longed to evolve. Her sense of creative inadequacy was misplaced. Leduc's language indubitably displays 'poeticity', as it is defined by Jakobson. Hers is an art which is informed by her awareness of, and ability to exploit, the non- or self-referential, 'plastic' quality of words. Her texts convey an unforgettable impression that their signifiers serve as aesthetic artefacts, and do not merely represent 'windows' onto the real. Leduc is not simply 'une femme [qui] descend au plus secret de soi et [ . . . ] se raconte avec une sincérité intrépide',<sup>5</sup> or a (proto-) feminist novelist whose work illustrates the feminine condition in a new and revealing way. Although she is both of these things, she is also a poet, and critics who neglect the poetic dimension of her writing inevitably produce partial and impoverished accounts of her work.

For those of us who have been captivated by Leduc's *œuvre*, it is hard to understand why critical acclaim eluded her for most of her lifetime and continues to do so today. Various explanations for the obscurity in which her work still languishes offer themselves. Firstly, as Beauvoir succinctly puts it, 'Violette Leduc ne veut pas plaire; elle ne plaît pas et même elle effraie. Les titres de ses livres — *L'Asphyxie*, *L'Affamée*, *Ravages* — ne sont pas rians'.<sup>6</sup> Leduc's texts are frequently depressing; they can seem rebarbative and critics have undoubtedly been deterred by their bleakness. Furthermore, as my discussion of *Ravages* has indicated, her works do not lend themselves easily to interpretation. Leduc is 'difficult', and 'difficult' authors, particularly when they are also women authors, do not always attract the critical attention they deserve.<sup>7</sup> Above all, however, Leduc has been neglected because she is hard to 'place' — a fact of which she herself was painfully aware.<sup>8</sup> While it is possible to approach her as a feminist writer, or a modernist, or an autobiographer bent on a quest for self-understanding, or a 'poète maudit(e)',<sup>9</sup> attempts to attach exclusive and definitive labels to her work inevitably come to grief. It is to be hoped, nevertheless, that her writing will not be forgotten. She may have perceived herself as a 'désert qui monologue' but, as Beauvoir states in her

preface to *La Bâtarde*, the ‘desert’ of Leduc’s *œuvre* contains ‘des beautés innombrables’ (*La Bâtarde*, p. 7).

## NOTES

1. Elaine Showalter, ‘Toward a Feminist Poetics’, in Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 125–43 (p. 137).
2. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum, de l’autre femme*, p. 85.
3. Margaret Whitford, ‘Rereading Irigaray’, p. 108.
4. For Irigaray, the Demeter/Kore myth offers a unique vision of a privileged mother/daughter union that (partially) avoids the ‘taint’ of the patriarchal system and the masculine imaginary. She views the bond between these two mythic figures as ‘a good mother/daughter relationship outside the patriarchal regime’, and implies that Demeter and Kore resist the exile upon which ‘normal’ femininity, as it is constructed in our masculinist, œdipal culture, is predicated (Luce Irigaray, ‘Interview’, in Janet Todd (ed.), *Women Writers Talking* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1983), pp. 232–45 (p. 239)).
5. Beauvoir, *La Bâtarde* (preface), pp. 7–8.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
7. De Courtivron argues forcefully that if critics have refused to make the necessary effort to penetrate Leduc’s hermetic textual world, it is because she is female, and ‘women’s deviance from accepted cultural or literary patterns does not lead — as it has in the case of many male writers — to the recognition of innovative or visionary pronouncements and to their eventual assimilation into the literary canon’ (De Courtivron, *Violette Leduc*, p. 16).
8. De Courtivron discusses Leduc’s ‘unplaceability’ at length in ‘A Life and Work that Resist Tradition’, in *ibid.*, pp. 1–17.
9. De Courtivron concludes that while the comparison does not hold perfectly, ‘if one were to associate Violette Leduc with any tradition, it would most likely be with the lineage of *poètes-maudits*, with the naysayers of literature, the self-appointed destroyers of literary and social rules, the decadent, semi-mad geniuses who created beauty from their fantasies and visions. [...] Violette Leduc’s defiance of social and literary conventions, her flagrant departure from accepted life-styles, and the intensity of her visions — all of which she re-creates in her writing — parallel those of earlier writers in this particular line’ (*ibid.*, pp. 14–15).