

# Bodies and signs: inscriptions of femininity in John Coetzee and Wilma Stockenström<sup>1</sup>

Michael du Plessis

## Summary

What is the relation between sign and body in French feminism, as proposed by, for example, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva? Even in ostensibly feminist discourses, the body has been read as the fixed reference of any utterance, but French feminism forces us to consider the body – and specifically the female body – itself as always and already a sign: source of all metaphors in Cixous, a stubborn residue after signification in Kristeva. It is possible then, to read inscriptions of femininity in avant-garde texts, regardless of the actual gender of their authors. John Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and Wilma Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* are exemplary explorations of a textual femininity that is inscribed in silences, gaps, or pure sounds, elements that are marginal to any authoritative, transparent discourse. The feminine is another language within the language of representation and symbolisation: both *In the Heart of the Country* and *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* foreground the otherness of language, and the problem of translation. What is finally at stake is a strategy of reading which refuses to assign any meaning to "woman".

## Opsomming

Wat is die verhouding tussen teken en liggaam in Franse feminisme, soos voorgestel deur byvoorbeeld Hélène Cixous en Julia Kristeva? Selfs in oënskynlik feministiese diskoerse word die liggaam gelees as die vasgestelde verwysing van enige uiting, maar Franse feminisme dwing ons om die liggaam – en juis die vroulike liggaam – as altyd en alreeds 'n teken te beskou. Vir Cixous is dit 'n bron van alle metafore; vir Kristeva is dit 'n oorblyfsel na die betekenisproses. Dit is dan moontlik om inskripsies van *le féminin* in avant-garde tekste te lees, ongeag die werklike geslag van hul skrywers. John Coetzee se *In the Heart of the Country* en Wilma Stockenström se *Die Kremetartekspedisie* is uitmuntende verkenings van 'n tekstuele vroulikheid wat in stiltes, onderbrekings en suiwer klanke ingeskryf is. Hierdie elemente is randelemente van enige deursigtige, gesaghebbende diskoers. *Le féminin* is dus 'n ander taal binne die taal van simbolisering en representasie. Beide *In the Heart of the Country* en *Die Kremetartekspedisie* let op die andersoortigheid van taal, en die moeikhede van vertaling. Wat op die spel is, is 'n leesstrategie wat weier om enige betekenis aan "vrou" te heg.

Claude Lévi-Strauss posits a link, at the very origins of sociality, between female body and feminine sign:

The emergence of symbolic thought must have required that women, like words, should be things that were exchanged . . . But woman could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man's world she is still a person, and since in so far as she is defined as a sign she must be recognised as a generator of signs . . . In contrast to words, which have wholly become signs, woman has remained at once a sign and a value. (Levi-Strauss, 1969: 496 in Furman, 1985: 60-61)

"Woman", for Lévi-Strauss, is primarily a counter in the system of exchanges between men that Julia Kristeva calls "the social-symbolic-linguistic contract"

(Kristeva, 1980: 238). If the body has consistently been read as the site of utterance, the fixed reference point of any discourse, then "woman" plays a contradictory role, as both sign and body, object of exchange and subject of enunciation. What manner of signs can be articulated from such a contradiction?

John Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and Wilma Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* are texts that demand to enter into dialogue with each other, for they both speak of the female body as it is (de)constructed by a certain practice of writing. Yet neither of these texts deals with what could be described as "women's experience" as it has been understood by Anglo-American feminists; Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* and the anonymous slave of *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* are more stereotypical than representative. Magda is a "miserable black virgin" (Coetzee, 1977: 5), an "angry spinster in the middle of nowhere" (4) and a "fierce mantis virgin" (116) who is withdrawn from the exchange of marriage (10); the slave, exists by definition as an object of exchange, and she muses on the similarity between her status and that of other commodities: "Once they [beads] used to be accepted in exchange for things, just as I was accepted in exchange for something" (Stockenström, 1983: 13). The one figure contests the exchangeability of women, while the other turns it into an endless process. (Consider the several "owners" or "benefactors" of the protagonist in the *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*). Both women are excluded from value: "Of course I have no idea what my value must have been or what it ever was" (13), or significance: "If I am an emblem then I am an emblem. I am incomplete, I am a being with a hole inside me, I signify something, I do not know what, I am dumb. . . ." (1977: 9).

Slave or spinster, virgin or whore: presumably, a traditionally feminist practice would attempt to demystify such extremes, constructing "woman" as her own proper value, neither simply a commodity in a masculine economy nor an empty emblem on the outskirts of meaning. But it is from exactly such an anomalous position, simultaneously inside and outside signifying practice, that Magda and the slave produce signs. Both texts are written in the first person; in both texts, "woman" says "I". To return to the contradiction – noted by Lévi-Strauss, signs or discourses are produced in these texts from *somewhere* (a body?), but that body is itself already a configuration of signs. Therefore one must in no way confuse the body of or in the text with the body of a presumed author. That John Coetzee is demonstrably male and Stockenström female, is irrelevant; the anatomy of an author cannot determine the destiny of a text. (Magda reiterates the infamous Freudian dictum: 114.) Nor should one attribute the presence of femininity in a text by a male writer like Coetzee to some empathetic involvement in the condition of women. What price exotic slaves and demented spinsters in the South Africa of the eighties, anyway? The documentation or reconstruction of women's historical experience takes place in a different arena, that of autobiography and testimony.

What is at stake in both *In the Heart of the Country* and *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is what Hélène Cixous calls a "sext" (Cixous in Marks and de Courtivron, 1981: 255), or a textual enunciation of femininity, an emission

of signs, to appropriate Cixous's liquid metaphors, from the *place* of the feminine. This is the paradox of a possible feminine language or writing, which has preoccupied French theorists like Cixous, Kristeva, Xavière Gauthier, and Luce Irigaray. Gauthier argues, for example, that

if . . . "replete" words (*mots pleins*) belong to men, how can women speak "otherwise", unless, perhaps, we can *make audible* that which agitates within us, suffers silently in the *holes of discourse*, in the unsaid, or in the non-sense. (Gauthier in Marks and de Courtivron, 1981: 162-63)

For the French feminists, their project has been the subversion of authoritative "male" discourse by means of whatever is marginal to meaning: pure sound, ruptures, verbal play. Kristeva attests to the interface between gender indeterminacy and linguistic ambivalence: "All speaking subjects have within themselves a certain bisexuality which is precisely the possibility to explore all the sources of signification, that which posits a meaning as well as that which multiplies, pulverises, and finally revives it" (Kristeva in Marks and de Courtivron, 1981: 165). Not only do *In the Heart of the Country* and *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* describe instances of social marginality, they also test the limits of meaning: both texts are concerned with language and its loss.

Magda describes her utterances over and over again as meaningless and unrestrained verbal proliferation, quite often in onomatopoeic synonyms for "nonsense" such as "prattle" (49), "gabble" (84), "chatter" (110), "babble" (48, 59 and 113), "cackling" and "gibbering" (45). This language transforms itself into the hardness of pure, non-signifying phonemic matter, so that Magda speaks of herself as "this brittle hairy shell with the peas of dead words *ratling* in it" (37, my emphasis). Words like "mumble" and "stammer" (88) equally characterise the language of the slave, a language that can revert at any moment to screams and meaningless sounds. Such a scream is posited at the lost, yet always present origin of the slave's birth: "No one could or would tell me to whom I called when the child's skull made its appearance out of me. It was a scream back to the place of birth. There it echoed. There it echoes" (42). Only diacritically, differentially, in relation to the noises of animals, can her utterance be identified as "human", part of signifying practice; in effect there is an enormous gap between the "human" act of talking and the "sound" she produces:

. . . I opened my mouth and brought out a sound that must be the sound of a human being because I am a human being and not a wildebeest that snorts and not a horned locust that produces whistling noises with its wings and not an ostrich that booms, but a human being that talks, and I brought out a sound and produced an accusation and hurled it up at the twilight air. (Stockenström, 1983: 65)

Even the activity of diacritical definition does not so much specify as displace the indescribable "sound". Such language can only tell the reader onomatopoeically what it is *not*, just as Kristeva asserts that "a feminist practice can

only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it'" (in Marks and de Courtivron, 1981: 137). Moreover, this indescribable "sound", that is both inside and outside language, is tied to power: "A bloody sound was exposed to the air, with which I tried to subject everything around me. To be able to dominate with one long raw sound" (Stockenström, 1983: 65). Like Magda, the slave finds that the "names" of masculine symbolisation become "rattles" in her mouth:

Now I have the names for everything: slave, castration, commerce, coastal city, sea, forced labour. Yes, now I have it all.

I have the names and I am not listened to. There is nothing I can do with the names. They are nothing but rattles. (Stockenström, 1983: 100)

These "names/rattles" are also, significantly, terms in the narrative of colonialism.

Her prophecy of other languages once again demonstrates the intersections of sign and pure matter:

I heard the words fall from my mouth in snatches over the cliff to be swallowed by the windfilled silence, words that spoke of a jackal that would run through the air with a burning tail and set all the air afire. So there sprang a jackal from my mouth. I heard myself prophesy feverishly of languages that yet slept. . . (Stockenström, 1983: 88)

Language turns ambivalent, contradictory, self-destructive: it is at once concrete, so that it becomes that of which it speaks, namely the "jackal", but it is also subject to divisions and regressions. The reader is not given the prophecy, but is simply *told* about it, and the prophecy itself concerns other, not as yet existent languages. The materiality of language is permeated by silence; the wind snatches words, and after her prophecy, "when all the fibrous sounds were off my tongue, I felt as if something had been gnawing at me, as if I had been gnawed full of holes and no longer obstructed the wind . . ." (89). Magda calls on her father "Speak to me! Do I have to call on you in words of blood to make you speak? What horrors more do you demand of me? Must I carve out my beseechings with a knife on your flesh?" (Coetzee, 1977: 72)

What these citations have in common is an insistence on the physicality of the signifier as sound or as writing. Yet, the language we are reading mediates such corporality by inscribing it within the language of representation. At the same time, silence and absence assume an importance, so that feminine language, in these texts, presents itself as either babble or mutism. There is another inscription within language, another writing, which points to those elements in social language which makes its "social, symbolic" functioning (Kristeva, 1980: 239) impossible. Language consists of both physical signifiers, graphic marks or phonemic articulations, and of the silences and blanks on which these signifiers are predicated. Now it is precisely these elements in the language, marginal to it, but ineluctably inscribed in it, that one can identify as *feminine*. What is one to make of the following passage?

If I could write I would take up a porcupine quill and scratch your enormous belly full from top to bottom. I would clamber up so far as your branches and carve notches in your armpits to make you laugh. Big letters. Small letters. In a script full of lobes and curls, in circumambient lines I write round and round you . . . Here comes a rhythmic pause. O, I have learnt lots from the poets, I am versed in the techniques, in the patching together of lyric and epic. Rhythmic pause and on roll the thoughts, round and round your trunk . . .

Thus I decorate you line after line with our hallucinations . . . and satisfied I put down the porcupine quill and stand back to regard my handiwork, hands on my hips. You are full of my scars, baobab. I did not know I had so many.

If I could write. (Stockenström, 1983: 39-31)

Here the emphasis is once more on plenitude – “full from top to bottom”, “full of lobes and curls”, “round and round” – and on the materiality of language – both inscription: “scratch”, “carve”, “notches”, “lobes and curls” – and as articulation “rhythmic pause”. The slave’s writing could be both an inscription *of*, and *on*, a body: “belly”, “armpits”, and “trunk” are all mentioned; the enormous belly full of writing hints at a textual pregnancy. But this body is metaphoric, deriving from a pun on “trunk” as both “torso” and “major section of a tree”. Moreover, this writing is *not* the writing we are reading, because it is introduced and rounded off by a subjunctive modalisation, “If I could write . . .”, which makes the writing before us problematic, even contradictory, and this contradiction, of course, forms the basis of feminine writing. In it, the body becomes metaphor, and the metaphor body.

No wonder that Magda wonders “Am I . . . a thing among things, a body propelled along a track . . ., or am I a monologue moving through time, approximately five feet above the ground, if the ground does not turn out to be just another word, in which case I am indeed lost?” (1977: 62). Monologue or body? Feminine language, it would seem, appears as an aporia between the semiological and the somatic. Yet, at other times, Magda insists on an opposition between the two: “What solace are lapidary paradoxes for the loves of the body?” (8).

Magda’s language is often described in these lapidary terms: the stone becomes a trope for a discourse that is opaque: “Is it possible that I’m a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse and the stone desert but of my stony monologue?” (1983: 12). Words are rocks specific to Magda’s “genderlect” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1985: 520): “That is why my words are not words such as men use to men . . . I creep into rhythms that are my own, stumble over the rocks of words that I have never heard on another tongue” (1977: 8), or “Words come reluctantly to me, they clatter in my mouth and tumble out heavily like stones” (1977: 83). Most dramatically, there are the whitewashed stones which Magda uses to try to communicate with flying machines in “a Spanish of pure meanings such as might be dreamed of by the philosophers . . .” (1977: 126). But pure signified turns into pure signifier: “I have tried forming messages with stones, but stones are too unwieldy for the distinctions I need to make” (1977: 129; see also 131-134). The message itself finally becomes a body: “And, descending to ideographs, I spent all my

stones on a sketch of a woman lying on her back, her figure fuller than mine, her legs parted. . . ." (1977: 134).

However, absence characterises Magda's language as powerfully as its stoniness:

. . . myself as a sheath, as a matrix, as protectrix of a vacant inner space. I move through the world . . . as a hole with a body draped around it, the two spindly legs hanging loose at the bottom and the two bony arms flapping at the sides and the big head lolling on top. I am a hole crying to be whole. (1977: 41)

She is "not unaware that there is a hole between her and legs that has never been filled, leading to another hole never filled either", and adds, "If I am an O, I am sometimes persuaded, it must be because I am a woman" (1977: 41). Magda's story is quintessentially an *histoire d'O*, an O-story, or "a history of silence" (1977: 59).<sup>2</sup> Even the eponymous heart of the country is also "the heart of nowhere" (1977: 76; see 50). Magda is "an emptiness, or a shell, a film over an emptiness longing to be filled in a world in which nothing fills" (1977: 114). Only the "torrent" (1977: 118) of words covers, momentarily, this absence at the core of the text. Various empty spaces, like the grave, the sealed room, the isolated house, and Magda's own cavities figure this absence. Ruptures and breaks in language are presented by narrative discontinuities (1977: 33), and by the decomposition of the text into two hundred and sixty six numbered segments; while the assault on monolithic language is figured by the threat of bodily dismemberment (1977: 11). The trope of wind brings utterance and silence, body and emptiness, together. "From my throat comes something which is not a cry, not a groan, not a voice, but a wind that blows from the stars and over the polar wastes and through me. The wind is white, the wind is black, it says nothing" (1977: 55). Later this wind/cry is described as a "black vortex . . . that roars in the spaces between the atoms of my body, whistles in the cavern behind my eyes" (1977: 56). The trope of wind occurs very early in the text: "To my father I have been an absence all my life. Therefore instead of being the womanly warmth at the heart of this house I have been a zero, null a vacuum towards which all collapses inward, . . . like a chill draft eddying through the corridors, neglected, vengeful" (1977: 2).

Wind appears as a metonymy of feminine mutism in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* as well (pp. 53, 87, 89, 93 and 97). And, recalling the stony tropes of *In the Heart of the Country*, there are frequent allusions to rose quartz, and the "mirage of a city in a blooming red desert" (1977: 53) which is the object of the eponymous expedition. Yet here one encounters a pronounced difference between the two texts. *In the Heart of the Country* dramatises feminine language as stone, cut, wind and silence. Despite the reappearance of these elements in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, the latter text re-values them by introducing another element: water. "I who come from the heart of the country bear the murmur of waters subliminally with me, a water-knowledge preserved in my tears and saliva, in the blood of my veins, in all the juices of my body" (1983: 20). Note the remarkable echo

of Coetzee's title, but while Magda's heart" is a hollow, here the "heart" is a repository of "water-being" (1983: 20), something that is neither present nor absent, but something mobile that moves between binaries. The following passage is exemplary:

In this dream in which I am forced to live, I take refuge more often in the city of rose quartz, for thus have I already adapted the hunter's story. Not only does the mountain glitter rosily, but also that city in which I wander in the company of many others like myself . . . I am of a self-sufficient crystallinity, transmuted into pure bliss. I am one whole, and divided too and present in everything everywhere.

Strange that the water-spirit sends me to a desert, but I understand, for, see, the water too has become quartz, everything has, stone and water and man have the consistency of quartz and the glory and the glorious knowledge of splintering and remaining glorious. . .

The insult of not being allowed to be human, that I have overcome. All ugly visions too. . . ; for I myself determine appearance and reality. I rule. I dream outwards and with the self-assurance of those who have long ago discerned that it is all just appearance I smile to myself, follow my own path diligently, will drink this parting poison gift in the nourishing awareness that dream leads to dream. (1983: 101)

Indeed, all the binaries intermingle without any fixed synthesis: male, female, poison, nourishment, liquescence, solidification, dream, reality, "deathsmilk" (1983: 20). Cixous has attempted to describe an "other bisexuality" (Cixous in Marks and de Courtivron, 1981: 254) in writing:

To admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death – to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion . . . but infinitely dynamised by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another . . . Bisexuality: that is, each one's location in self (*répérage en soi*) of the presence variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female – of both sexes, non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex . . . (Cixous in Marks and de Courtivron, 1981: 254)

This is precisely what one sees in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*. Is it not possible to read the baobab as an emblem of bisexuality? "Reborn every time from the belly of the baobab, I stand full of myself" (1983: 14). At the same time, the baobab, is phallic trunk and branches; equally the baobab, as the title indicates, and not the El Dorado of the city of rose quartz is the unexpected goal of the colonising expedition. It is also the origin and the end of the text, because the slave tells her narrative from the baobab tree (1983: 7), while the baobab tree is the culmination of the story.

Cixous herself privileges metaphors of liquescence above all others: "For Cixous, as for countless mythologies, water is the feminine element *par excellence*: the closure of the mythical world contains and reflects the comforting security of the mother's womb" (Moi, 1985: 117). Allusions to water

are far too frequent in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* to enumerate (see pp. 5, 10, 19, 20, 36, 37, 43, 63, 64, 85, 88–89, 96). Two instances deserve closer consideration. The women with whom the slave spends the early days of her slavery speak “a language that poured down around her like a waterfall, it fell and fell from their mouths” (1983: 15). There is, of course, the unimpeded flow of the text itself. *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is uninterrupted by any conventional literary divisions, such as chapters. Water is not only associated with the flows of the female body/language, but it becomes a mirror as well: “Sometimes when I am washing myself in the river I regard my reflection critically in a calm pool . . . I throw a pebble into myself. I rock grotesquely up and down and break up in lumps. Restless I. Then I withdraw myself from my divided self in the water” (1983: 66). Such mirror-bonding – and one has to recall the slave’s “sister-being” (1983: 31, also 63 and 64), the water-spirit who is her imaginary companion – recalls the Imaginary, as described by Jaques Lacan (1971: I, 238-240). This is a pre-symbolic moment in a child’s development, characterised by what Jane Gallop calls “mirroring one to one identification” (1982: 135). The Imaginary is dominated by the mother who is herself a mirror for the infant (Lacan, 1971: II, 67). The socio-symbolic contract or the child’s entry into sociality, called the Symbolic order by Lacan is signed by what Lacan terms *le Nom-du-Père* (1971: II, 73), a homophonic pun on “nom” (“name”) and “non” (“no”): the inscription is an interdiction. Magda “waits for her father’s eyebrows to coalesce, then the black pools beneath them, then the cavern of the mouth from which echoes and echoes his eternal NO” (1977: 16; see also 51).

Cixous attempts to return to *imaginary* undifferentiation. “Her vision of female writing is in this sense firmly located within the closure of the Lacanian Imaginary: a space in which all difference has been abolished” (Moi, 1985: 117). Not surprisingly, all the French feminists try to sidestep the Symbolic order. Kristeva goes so far as to say “. . . the subject’s freedom . . . would consist precisely in its relative escape from the symbolic order” (1980: 215-216). Yet what is imaginary, liquescent plenitude and presence in Cixous is somewhat more arid for Kristeva: the escape from symbolisation is never total. She posits another pre-symbolic possibility, the semiotic, in dialectical opposition to the symbolic. For Kristeva, the semiotic is not a utopian *elsewhere* as the imaginary seems to be for Cixous: the relation between semiotic and symbolic is dialectical rather than antithetical. The semiotic in Kristeva occurs in all the elements of language marginal to meaning: phonemes, discontinuities, silences, verbal play. As Leon Roudiez explains, Kristeva uses the term *le sémiotique* rather than *la sémiotique* which is semiotics, the science of signs (in Kristeva, 1980: 17-18).

In the course of a long passage, Magda draws a distinction between meaning and moaning that indicates very precisely the difference between the semiotic and the symbolic, and the latter’s relation to a fixed system. Indeed, the body is possessed by the symbolic Law, which inscribes itself magisterially on the body:

The lips are tired, . . . they want to rest, they are tired of all the articulating they



have had to do since they were babies, since it was revealed to them that there was a law, that they could no longer simply part themselves to make way for the long *aaaa* which has if truth be told, always been enough for them, enough of an expression of whatever this is that needs to be expressed, or clench themselves over the long satisfying silence into which I shall still, I promise, one day retire. I am exhausted by obedience to this law, I try to say, whose mark lies on me in the spaces between the words, the paces or the pauses, and the articulations that set up the war of sounds, the *b* against the *d*, the *m* against the *n*, and so forth . . . The law has gripped my throat, I say and do not say, it invades my larynx, its one hand on my tongue, its other hand on my lips . . . How can I say that the law does not stand full grown inside my shell, its feet in my feet, its hands in my hands, its sex drooping through my hole . . . (1977: 84)

The difference between Cixous and Kristeva, fluidity and aridity, utopia and abjection appears as a difference in their respective theorisations of the body. For Cixous, the body is the source of all metaphors, specifically the maternal body but, Cixous warns “the mother, too, is a metaphor” (in Marks and de Courtivron, 1981: 252). On the other hand, Kristeva calls “body” “something that falls out, remains left over, a remnant” after the process of signification has taken place, “a displacement felt as an opacity” (Kristeva, 1985: 215). What one has here then, is a choice between literal and figurative bodies: both representations turn on a strategy of reading. Cixous has pointed out that the textuality of the body, or impermissible literal or figurative readings, are vital in contesting the fixed meanings and essences assigned by patriarchy. Using *The Song of Songs* she points out how a figurative reading is forced on the text, thereby censoring any erotic or subversive potential (Cixous, 1977: 468). However, Alice Jardine has suggested that the entire poststructuralist project has been the exploration of an increasingly figurative body, the trope of maternity (Jardine, 1981: 223-225). Literal and figurative versions of the body are inverted, unsettling any fixed phallogocentric meaning, so that the reader reads figuratively the literal as Jardine suggests, or literally the figurative, as Kristeva does in her definition of the “body”. The body is then everything that cannot be contained by a sign, but also all signs that cannot be pinned to a reference. Kristeva observes that the notion of the body “haunts” semiology as something for which it cannot account: “This relation is also one of emptiness, of the unnameable, of non-sense and of opaque experience which we could designate by the word increasingly haunting semiological theories: the body” (1985: 214).

In the semiotic or the Imaginary, language speaks *against* itself: it would seem that language slips into a trance. But this trance is essentially a translocation, literally a speaking in tongues, another language in language. In *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* the slaves speak other languages, “a variety of tongues”, and they “[mangle] the natives’ language and [turn] it into [their] idiosyncratic workers’ language” (1983: 23); Magda communicates with her flying machines in Spanish (1977: 124-134).

Clearly, although *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is a text by a woman in which a woman speaks, in the form that I have used it, it is a translation by

Coetzee. (The dust jacket notes quote André Brink on the “female body” and the “female mind”, and on the excellence of Coetzee as a translator!) In *In the Heart of the Country*, such gender ventriloquism is more apparent – it is a text by a man in which a woman speaks. But the process of translation is still there: the half-title page informs us that this is an “English version prepared by the author”. *In the Heart of the Country* is thus a translation of itself, within its own language, by its own author. Language, it seems, is irreducibly foreign, female, other; Barbara Johnson remarks that in Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”

The problem of understanding the woman is here a problem of translation. Even her name can only be expressed in another tongue. The sexes stand in relation to each other not as two distinct entities but as two foreign languages . . . Is she mine, asks the knight, or am I hers? If these are the only two possibilities, the foreignness of the languages cannot be respected. (Johnson, in Davis and Schleifer, 1985: 108)

Not surprisingly, Magda refers to herself as a “crazy old queen in the middle of nowhere” (1977: 138). Cixous suggests that the drag queen (*la folle*) represents an eruption of otherness (*l'afollement*) in the stable language of the self (Cixous in Stambolian and Marks, 1979: 77). Trance, translation, transvestism: the body never coincides with a single sign. Instead, the body is itself polymorphously, polysemously, always already a text.

## Notes

1. The kernel of this paper was first presented as part of a workshop, “Women and the Word”, at the Silver Jubilee Conference of the English Academy, in 1986. I am grateful to Dana Labe for discussion and suggestions. All ellipses in the text are mine.
2. Kaja Silverman writes that “*Histoire d’O* is more than O’s story. It is the history of a female subject – of the territorialisation and inscription of a body . . .” (in Vance, 1984: 346).
3. Interestingly enough, the notorious false generic “man” in the passage is a (mis)translation of the neutral, and neuter, “mens” in the Afrikaans version (Stockenström, 1981: 99). Translation, as I suggest at the end of the essay, necessarily entails shifts of gender.

## References

### Primary Texts

- Coetzee, J.M. 1977. *In the heart of the country*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Stockenström, Wilma. 1983. *The expedition to the baobab tree*. Trans. J.M. Coetzee. London: Faber.
- Stockenström, Wilma. 1981. *Die kremetartekspedisie*. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau.

## Critical Texts

- Cixous, Hélène. 1977. Entretien avec Françoise van Rossum-Guyon. *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 168: 479-493.
- Cixous, Hélène. 1981. The laugh of the Medusa. In: Marks, Elaine; de Courtivron, Isabelle (eds.). *New French feminisms: an anthology*. Brighton: Harvester Press. Press.
- Cixous, Hélène. 1979. Rethinking Differences: An Interview. In: Stambolian, George; Marks, Elaine (eds.). *Homosexualities and French literature: cultural contexts/critical texts*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Furman, Nelly. 1985. The politics of language: beyond the gender principle? In: Greene, Gayle; Kahn, Coppelia (eds.). *Making a difference: feminist literary criticism*. London: Methuen.
- Gallop, Jane. 1982. *Feminism and psychoanalysis: the daughter's seduction*. London: Macmillan.
- Gilbert, Sandra; Gubar, Susan. 1985. Sexual linguistics: gender, language and society. *New Literary History* 3 (Spring): 515-543.
- Greene, Gayle; Kahn, Coppélia (eds.). 1985. *Making a difference: feminist literary criticism*. London: Methuen.
- Jardine, Alice. 1981. Pre-texts for a Transatlantic feminism. *Yale French Studies* 62: 220-236.
- Johnson, Barbara. 1985. Gender theory and the Yale School. In: Davis, Robert Con; Schleifer, Ronald (eds.). *Rhetoric and form: deconstruction at Yale*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1980. *Desire in language: a semiotic approach to literature and art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1985. The speaking subject. In: Blonsky, Marshall (ed.). *On signs: a semiotics reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1971. *Écrits I et II*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Marks, Elaine; de Courtivron, Isabelle (eds.). 1981. *New French feminisms: an anthology*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Moi, Toril. 1985. *Sexual/textual politics: feminist literary theory*. London: Methuen.
- Roudiez, Leon S. 1980. Introduction. In: Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in language: a semiotic approach to literature and art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Silverman, Kaja. 1984. *Histoire d'O: The construction of female subject*. In: Vance, Carole S. (ed.). *Pleasure and danger: exploring female sexuality*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Scharfman, Ronnie. 1981. Mirroring and mothering in Simone Schwartz-Bart's *Pluie et Vent sur Telumée Miracle* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Yale French Studies* 62: 154-184.