

Hole Studies: French Feminist Fiction

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The hole is one of the most basic symbols of sexual difference: the amphitheater, the cave, and the valley are the physical counterparts of the spire, the obelisk, and the mountain. A close examination of imagery related to holes may be expected to shed light on a given author's view of women and all that women represent. Does the concept of hole conjure up a garbage pit, a grave, a bottomless abyss? Or is it a safe and sheltering valley, perhaps even an entrance to a magical secret grotto? In classical literature, images related to holes emphasize the toothed womb, which posits the hole as a danger, a place that bites or deceives. This image of the vagina dentata enshrines an archetypal fear of the female sex.

The most extensive analysis of metaphorical feminine imagery in feminist literary theory is found in the works of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Irigaray, in rejecting Freud's discussion of femininity, points out that when female sexuality is defined by males, the vagina is a hollow penis.¹ The negative connotations of the word *hollow*, particularly when associated with the fecundating penis, make it a symbol of impotence. As we learn from Toril Moi, Irigaray herself redefines the importance of the hollow in her *Spéculum de l'autre femme* by showing that a speculum illuminates "caves" by virtue of its concave shape.² She goes on to argue in her article "This Sex Which is not One" that the hidden nature of the female sexual organ has contributed to its exclusion from artistic representation.³ Cixous shows that while it is easy to condemn the historical glorification of the phallus, it is not necessary to set up an enemy camp that exalts the "antiphallus." As she says in "The Laugh of the Medusa," "We don't fawn around the supreme hole."⁴ Both Cixous and Irigaray use the hole as an overt representation of the female sex in their philosophical works.

In the following pages I will discuss the imagery related to holes in three novel-length works by French women writers of the twentieth century. All were published in the three-year period between 1969 and 1972. Two of the books are utopian; the other was inspired by the author's personal experience. In all of them, the hole is a major source of imagery, and all reveal it to be a source of power. Because each writer has a unique feminist vision, the power takes a different form in each case.

Wittig: The Pregnant Zero

The hole may be reduced in linear terms to a circle, as in *Les Guérillères*.⁵ Published in 1969, the book has been variously characterized as a collection of prose poetry, a series of short stories, or a novel. The text is interspersed with large black circles that occupy the entire page, affirming the primacy of the feminine. The circle, a heavy black line set by itself on a page, resonates with meaning. It is a symbol of gender unity in a text that stages the war between the sexes as a literal fact. It is a reiteration of the cyclical imperative evoked by the phoenixes in the poem which frames and traverses

the text. Throughout the text, there is repeated mention of circles, round dances, words starting with O and other references to a cycle. Erika Ostrovsky sees in this repetition both the emblem of fecundity and the Wheel of Life, “symbols of both the preservative and the transformative powers of the Female Principle.”⁶ The futuristic passages of the text express Wittig’s vision in circular terms; residences and monuments are spherical in shape. Thus, the O represents her ideal.

Even the form of the text is circular; it begins with a feminist utopia and ends with the battles that bring it about. In the beginning of the text, the women—the feminine plural “they” who are the narrative subject—exalt the vulva and its symbol, the circle, but they discontinue the practice once it has served the purpose of uniting them and giving them a sense of strength:

Elles disent qu’il faut alors cesser d’exalter les vulves. Elles disent qu’elles doivent rompre le dernier lien qui les rattache à une culture morte. Elles disent que tout symbole qui exalte le corps fragmenté est temporaire, doit disparaître. Jadis il en a été ainsi. Elles, corps intègres premiers principaux, s’avancent en marchant ensemble dans un autre monde. (102)

Here the use of a counter-symbol that emphasizes difference (the circle which represents the vulva) is condemned in favor of a symbol signifying wholeness (the circle which represents the integrity of the body). In the same way, the fragments of the text form a whole that is a story of vanquishing difference and uniting in the face of adversity.

The text is a collection of fragments forming a whole. The fragments do not present the same characters, the same history, or even the same universe in any coherent fashion. Each fragment is a tale in itself, and the accumulation of these assorted parts forms a non-narrative progression moving through battles of various kinds to scenes of reconciliation, culminating in the singing of the “Internationale,” with *trionphant* as the last word.

The blank spaces separating the fragments are a physical reminder of the lacunae mentioned so often and so favorably in the text. Because they are blank, they may be taken to suggest the infinite possibilities of what might be written but has not yet been put into words. They are holes in the prose. Theoretically empty, they hold infinite possibilities. The text makes frequent mention of lacunae, particularly in the poem that runs through the text. On the last page of the poem, the line “SURGIS VIOLENCE DU BLANC” (205), illustrates the revolution that resides in the empty spaces. This revolution will include “LE TEXTE [...] QUI MANQUE” (205). Violence will become real by being written—not, however, within the text, but rather “HORS TEXTE / DANS UNE AUTRE ÉCRITURE” (205). Finally, she reiterates the importance of the empty space: “MARGES ESPACES INTERVALLES” (205), from which will come the rebellion, “GESTE RENVERSEMENT” (205).

Later in the text, Wittig explicitly equates women’s position with slavery and points out that she is speaking the master’s language, the language he has invented to express his proprietary relationship to the world:

Ce sur quoi ils n’ont pas mis la main, ce sur quoi ils n’ont pas fondu comme des rapaces aux yeux multiples, cela n’apparaît pas dans le langage que tu parles. Cela se manifeste juste dans

l'intervalle que les maîtres n'ont pas pu combler avec leurs mots de propriétaires et de possesseurs, cela peut se chercher dans la lacune, dans tout ce qui n'est pas la continuité de leurs discours, dans le zéro, le O, le cercle parfait que tu inventes pour les emprisonner et pour les vaincre. (162-4)

The lacuna, or empty space, is to be filled with all that women are not able to express in the oppressor's language. It will then be turned against the men to vanquish them. Certainly empty spaces are a necessity, and the zero holds a well-recognized place in any system involving numbers. Beyond this, the empty, or unconquered space, provides a protected place for the rebels' dreams and plans to grow.

The "cercle parfait que tu inventes pour les emprisonner et pour les vaincre" is literally the weapon described on page 155. It is a sphere held in the hands. A crater-like depression on the sphere projects a destructive beam of light. This non-phallic weapon is the imaginary extension of the toothed womb. The appearance of the women who use it is compared to that of insects, bringing to mind the mate-eating behavior of spiders and praying mantises. The womb-like sphere projects a death ray as its progeny. In the same way, the space within the zero, or the O, is used to incubate the rebellion which will overthrow the old order. The textual result, apart from being the book that we hold in our hands, is the revolutionary text that will deal the death blow to patriarchy.

Another fictitious weapon, the ospah, resembles a deadly circle, thrown like a lasso, creating a killing field. Like the female sex organ, "L'ospah est invisible tant qu'elle n'entre pas en action" (149). When it functions as a weapon, the ospah obliterates everything in its path. This fantasy of the destructive circle is a most exaggerated claim for the power of the feminine and very different from the hole we will see in the works of Hélène Cixous and Christiane Rochefort.

Wittig prizes empty space for the possibilities it represents. Her holes are breeding places for the insurgents who liberate women by harnessing the deadly power of the feminine, a power that is seated in an invisible weapon that wreaks destruction in battle. Women unite behind the O, the symbol that visually represents their sex and their unity.

Cixous: The Ruptured Hymen

*Les Commencements*⁷ (1970) is one of Cixous's early novels incorporating some autobiographical details—such as referring to her mother by her real name—despite a dream-like setting and non-narrative structure. Like *Les Guérillères*, the novel is filled with textual holes, blank spaces on the page that blot out any semblance of successiveness. The reader is confronted with a visually fragmented text showing little continuity from one section to the next. Unlike Wittig's text, however, *Les Commencements* is narrated by a consistent voice ("Je"), and certain "characters" (the mother, the father, and Saint-Georges) reappear throughout. There are many holes, and Cixous deliberately uses the hole in images associated with both male and female. The mixture of body parts to which the hole refers combines both the traditionally masculine (such as the eye) and the obviously feminine (such as the womb). This interchanging and mingling of genders is characteristic of the work.

The novel opens with the words “Je fis le rêve, mais c’était Saint-Georges qui le portait puisque j’étais dans les bras de Saint-Georges et que le rêve était dans moi” (17). Saint-Georges, her companion saint, accompanies the narrator throughout the novel. The “carrier” of a dream is, in a sense, the text itself. Thus, when she says, “Je fis le rêve, mais c’était Saint-Georges qui le portait,” perhaps we should translate this as, “I am the author, but Saint-Georges is the text.” As her lover and muse, Saint-Georges participates in the creation of the dream. Here we see the confusion of a writer who is not certain whether she is creating the text (giving birth to the dream) or the text is creating her (as a character in a novel). The image of giving birth is reinforced by the description of Saint-Georges as being bathed in a white milky light. The word *milky* is reiterated several times in the description, blurring the distinction between the inseminating father and the sustenance-providing mother.

Saint-Georges springs from her imagination, but here again there is considerable confusion over who engenders whom: “suivant que je m’éveillerai Ici ou Là, je serai fils ou fille de mon père par ma mère ou de ma mère par mon père” (58). The fact that Cixous’s father and son were both named Georges in no way lessens the confusion. An even more telling quote cites both the myth of the birth of Athena and Mallarmé’s “Le Vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui”:

Certains jours où je suis fils de mon amant je suis allaité à son sein, au cours de certaines nuits quand Saint-Georges est né de ma chair, tantôt surgi debout de ma tête, tantôt cygne émergeant, il me semble que j’ai mis au monde mon propre père. (143)

In this passage, Cixous is not merely alluding to Mallarmé’s poem, she is borrowing the play on words that he uses (*cygne/signe*) in order to turn Saint-Georges into a sign emerging from her head.

Apart from the uncertainty over who gives birth to whom—the father, the writer, or her own created character—there is gender confusion and a very definite oedipal overlay. When she goes on to discuss her own birth, she announces: “je suis le trou souple par où Lui peut passer en Ici” (58). The He she refers to is Saint-Georges, who, as her own creation, does in fact pass through the narrator in order to make his appearance on the page.

At the center of the novel is the narrator’s visit to Notre-Dame with Saint-Georges. It is announced with the words “Ici commence l’expédition à Notre-Dame” (141), set off by a blank space before and after and followed by a new page headed “*Une expédition nécessaire à Notre-Dame*” (142), so that we cannot fail to grasp the significance of this central episode. The concept of marriage is suggested by the mere fact that a male and female make an important trip to a cathedral together. It is here that Saint-Georges, the male figure, projects a part of himself that breaks through the surface, creating a hole in the cathedral. He spits, and his spittle pierces the ground, opening up a near-crater to astonish the multitude: “la foule est venue voir le trou par lequel le crachat avait disparu, non sans laisser d’échos, et de traînées [...] de sang” (154). Saint-Georges is acting as a guide, opening at her feet the hole which, like the novel, will attract the admiration of the many spectators. While this may be taken as a reference to the

cathedral's crypt and by extension to a bodily resurrection on Judgment Day (there is a loud noise and talk of angels), this penetrating spittle which leaves blood in its wake is reminiscent of a first sexual encounter. The narrator herself is shaken by the experience and adds, "Si le trou s'agrandissait, c'est moi qui serais engloutie" (157). As the author, she feels swallowed up by her own creation. Ten pages later she feels the upper half of her body to have become a gaping hole from which most of the important organs have disappeared: "Quel malheur, quelle injustice; le haut de mon corps est un trou obscur qui m'empêche de survivre, m'allège, me déséquilibre: c'est presque vide, plus de poumon, plus de cœur, plus de côtes bientôt" (167). She feels herself dissolving; she then progresses from partial to total emptiness. From a hole within herself she dredges up her textual matter, only to find that on paper it forms a yawning abyss. As she forms what she tries to leave formless, she suggests that her own borders become less sharp. She is literally emptying herself onto the page.

By the end of the novel she has come to the realization that the hole represents her past and herself. The hole she has become reminds us of the hole which gives birth to the sacred, as we read on page 102: "le trou d'où vient le sacré; je dis trou à cause de la façon dont le sacré se déplace en oscillant sur le ventre, comme un être qui a dû sortir, en s'étirant et se tortillant d'un trou trop étroit." The difficult birth thus described, producing in this fashion a twisted being, corresponds to textual production. The hole is once again the writer, the sacred her text, which moves with a certain independence, and which has a snakelike appearance.

The spittle of Saint-Georges, after all, not only opened a hole, but it also opened a dialogue. The noise it makes is "inouï." Furthermore, "Ce crachat *'donne de la voix'*" (153). Bordered by lips, the hole appears to be a vagina that speaks. "Les bords du trou étaient blancs mais on voyait que c'étaient des lèvres" (158). The narrator produces her text through and from her most female organ; she speaks with her vagina.

Assisted by Saint-Georges, she climbs with difficulty to the height of her aspirations. When she looks back to assess the cost of the achievement, she sees the size of the hole she has made of herself. Occasionally, she perceives her output as unworthy, as joining the "cesspool-sea" that receives it. But for the most part, it is the best of herself that she puts into her writing, her blood and milk—her most precious bodily fluids—that flow through her bodily openings into the world. This is why her final assessment of her work at the end of the novel, her last reference to the hole she has traversed is "J'étais moi-même absolument le trou vertigineux; en cela j'étais satisfaite" (243).

She makes this comparison when she has, with Saint-Georges, completed a difficult climb into the heavens on Jacob's ladder (begun on page 231). As she arrives at the end of her climb and the end of her book, she looks back at what appears to her to be both a bottomless chasm and a true, though head-spinning, expression of herself. During the course of the climb, she sprouts wings, clearly evolving from a creature of the earth to one of the upper realms. The space that she has traversed, a long and arduous textual climb, she finds to be not a towering pinnacle, a figurative erection, but rather a book-length hole that she has created from her own body and which she has difficulty

perceiving as separate from herself. This hole is more than a vagina; it is both a wound spilling the blood of the poet and a generous hole supplying nourishing liquid. It is like the nipples on page 113 from which flow the mother's milk. It is like the ruptured hymen on page 154 which opens the passage for fertilization. The writer opens herself, offers both her milk and her blood, receives and transforms the seminal fluid.

Her text, a conscious creation, is a hole filled with dreams and verbal creations. Her novel is a description of the act of writing, a climb into the heavens that is analogous to life. Beginning with a birth, the novel proceeds through a momentous sexual experience and culminates in a flight to the heavens. The gap we look into from the height to which she has carried us is our introduction to her textual metaphor: it is the beginning of our interpretation; it is our reading of the dream. At the very end, she asks Saint-Georges what they are doing. "On fait une vaste métaphore de faire l'amour" (249), he answers. The entire novel can be summed up as a sexual experience that bears fruit.

Rochefort: Nature Abhors a Vacuum

The utopian fantasy *Archaos, ou le jardin étincelant*,⁸ published in 1972, explores themes of androgyny, incest, and the relationship between sexual and political liberation. The novel describes a country that is a utopian model for a community conducted according to anarchist principles. It is a comic novel, not a serious political document, and elements of fantasy—such as a prince who exchanges bodies with his cat at odd intervals—preserve it from any appearance of realism. At the same time, the novel explores the use of power, particularly sexual power, in ways that belie the broad humor and farcical aspects. The country evolves from a traditional male-dominated monarchy to an anarchical state in which the twin son and daughter of the former king exercise the strongest influence. Their genuine concern for their fellow citizens is only exceeded by their commitment to enjoying themselves as much as possible. Thus their "rule" is predicated on the many possibilities for giving and receiving pleasure.

Sexual difference is very much the subject of this novel. It sets out to explore the relationship between the expression of power and diverse forms of sexual expression. By literally castrating the ruler in the first part of the novel, Rochefort prepares the reader for a social ground where power remains continually latent: it exists, but it is not exercised. Sexual and political power are openly, rather than clandestinely, equated. Rochefort uses both literal and metaphorical holes to suggest a female source of power rivaling the male phallus. The hole can easily be interpreted as a symbol of lack, emptiness or absence; certainly the circle on electrical equipment indicating the off mode makes it the opposite of a sign of power. Yet Rochefort's hole behaves like a vacuum, exercising a powerful attraction on the surrounding space and drawing in the resources it needs to actively create an egalitarian society. This is the unique quality of the country of Archaos, or Arch-chaos.

The very novel we read takes its existence from a clever manipulation of the meaning of the word *hole*. The history of the land of Archaos—the book we read—has supposedly been reconstructed by searching out what was lacking in official history:

everything that was missing was Archaos. Because Archaos represented such a threat to its neighbors, all references to it had been eliminated:

C'est au petit matin, dans des fumées diverses, que nous est venue l'idée—scientifiquement absurde—de joindre tous les points de disparition des coordonnées. Et, ô, merveille, nous obtenions ainsi une image par manque, une sorte de négatif! (7-8)

This supposedly verifiable lacuna assumes a wholeness to history impossible to justify in other than fanciful terms. At the same time, the very idea of the hole takes on an entirely new meaning. No longer an emptiness, a mere absence, it is a cutting out, an extraction.

By positing the historic hole as an extraction, Rochefort implies the once formidable existence of an incomparable female power, a power so great and fearsome that its very memory has been effaced. In its place remains a hole that may be taken to represent the position women have occupied ever since the destruction of Rochefort's fictitious country. It is a hole containing nothing. Its contents have not been transferred to another sphere; they have been wiped out entirely. The recreation of this vanished realm will restore balance and integrity to the past upon which the present is constructed. With this mythical country, Rochefort denies past myths in a conscious effort to create new ones. She uses the hole, traditionally associated with emptiness and powerlessness, as a sign of a female strength that must be recovered.

Furthermore, Archaos itself has become a hole which sucks people in. Its prevailing philosophy and lifestyle, particularly institutional support for complete sexual freedom and the absence of a recognizable hierarchy, are exceptionally attractive to outsiders, so much so that neighboring countries have difficulty determining exactly what is happening within its borders because the spies they send refuse to return. This "vacuum effect" of the new Archaos is one of the reasons its neighbors eventually join forces to vanquish it and erase all memory of its existence.

The new force which draws people in so strongly is undeniably related to female sexuality. The former regime was repressive to women. It was headed by the king, Avatar, whose interest in sex was so thoroughly sublimated he could only satisfy it during moments of madness he promptly forgot. His eternally frustrated queen, Avanie, dreamed constantly of candles. Their twin children, very nearly a single androgynous being, initiate a revolution in sexual mores and a more liberal attitude toward women.

There can be no question that Rochefort presents Archaos in the light of a lost Atlantis of powerful women, despite the fact that her imaginary country is still technically ruled by a king whose sister's power never equals his own. The threat posed by Archaos, simply because it allows equality to its women, is illustrated by the crushing response of its neighbors. Once they perceive the menace lurking in Archaos to the hierarchical existence they hold dear, the surrounding countries unite to annihilate it. The country is invaded, its borders rolled back, and all mention of it is subsequently removed from the chronicles. Indeed, so thoroughly has it been expunged from the pages of history that no echo of its name or principles remains today. But with the publication of its history, the author implies that the extraction may be reversed, the hole refilled. By bringing to light this mythical country's strength, which is an incomprehensibly powerful feminine force,

Rocheport voices her fantasy that this force may, having lain dormant for so long, once again well up in some equally mythical future to fill the abyss in male-female power relations and level the mountain of male political superiority.

Women are strong figures in all of these texts; they are warriors, rulers, providers, and dreamers. The holes in and around them are as unusual and varied as the characters and as the authors themselves. In every case, we see the hole as a dominant image with positive attributes. Whether entrance or exit, it is the passageway through which the writer's feminist thought is communicated. The hole may be a sexual symbol or a political one, but it is never empty of meaning. Although this study deals only with twentieth-century authors, it suggests that it would be fruitful to examine hole imagery in works of other periods. Representational art is laced with sexual symbols, including caves and crevices, which have been read and understood by a cultured public for centuries. Our reading of Marie de France, Christine de Pisan, Madame de Lafayette and George Sand—women writing in very different centuries and with markedly different view-points—will surely be enhanced by an analysis of the holes they have left us. The thoughts they encrypted will traverse the distance between their time and ours and arrive like a message in a bottle on our shores.

NOTES

¹ "This Sex Which is not One," in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: U. of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 99.

² *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), 130.

³ Toril Moi. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 144.

⁴ In *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, 1.4 (1976): 884.

⁵ Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères* (Paris: Minuit, 1969).

⁶ Erika Ostrovsky, "A Cosmogony of O: Wittig's *Les Guérillères*," in *Essays for Germaine Brée*, ed. George Stambolian (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1975) 247.

⁷ Hélène Cixous, *Les Commencements* (Paris: Grasset, 1970).

⁸ Christiane Rocheport, *Archaos, ou le jardin étincelant* (Paris: Grasset, 1972).

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