

Penelope Experiments

written by Joseph Houlihan | February 10, 2017



Those who do not move, do not notice their chains. –Rosa Luxemburg

I do believe there might be ways in language to express the extreme, the fleeting, the fugitive states that hover at the outermost boundaries of speech. –Carole Maso

I.

For many years, the Penelope story has been one of the foundational organizing metaphors for discussions around gender in modernism. This story, based on the devoted wife in *The Odyssey*, imagines a woman's writing that is at once frustrated and confined, and yet dreamy, expansive, and iterative. While Odysseus voyages across the epic narrative, Penelope remains waiting, endlessly weaving, and reweaving, a burial shroud. Penelope serves as an example of the defining paradox for women writing under patriarchy. Hélène Cixous finds a subversive power in the example, even as it remains a frustrated power. Iterative, non-narrative writing becomes a paradigm for a new, contemporary epic, or expansive serial text. These come out in powerful polyphonic or multivocal female performances, such as Billie Whitelaw's production of Beckett's *Not I*, or Hannah Weiner's *Clairvoyant Journal*. But the experience, and the sensation, of waiting within gendered constraints remains painfully familiar.

In her foundational essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous wrote of *écriture féminine*, and in the thirty-five years since she has alternately celebrated and fretted the concept. But Cixous has always championed formal experimentation; her first major work, *The Exile of James Joyce*, traced mutability and disassociation in Joyce. She was an active member of the avant-garde *Theatre Soleil*. She has written novels, essays, libretti, staying contemporary, prolific, refusing to fall into a single mode of inquiry. And as such, has maintained her status as an important voice for all literature and philosophy; she experiments, she drinks, she burns, and sometimes she tells a story.

Modernism often circumscribes a kind of waiting. This is the sensation Simone Weil speaks about as *malheur*, uneasiness in an incomprehensible and discontinuous contemporary experience that privileges certain bodies over

others. According to Cixous and Catherine Clement, in the prototypical modernist experience, Molly Bloom, and everywoman, is circumscribed to "Bridebed, childbed, bed of death." These tensions promote formal experiment, while still reflecting reaction.

II.

Dalkey Archive Press, one of the great American publishers of experimental writing, jumps on this sensation in various texts. Dalkey was founded in 1984, as the publishing arm of the journal, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Named for Flann O'Brien's high modernist romp, the press emphasizes original works and works in translation in the mode of Sterne, Joyce, Rabelais, Stein, and Barnes.

Formal experiment by Dalkey authors exposes fissures and binds. *What Waiting Really Means*, a 1990 novel by June Akers Seese, describes the outrage of never playing on equal footing. In this novel, the narrator rejects structures of patriarchy, even as they represent her only access to stability:

There were ups and downs. Marriage being what it has always been. But it was much better than blind dates with policemen who thought the world stopped at the cigar stand in the General Motors Building. I couldn't abide white-collar men who aspired to a fake colonial on two lots in Dearborn where that fat bastard gets reelected every year on the strength of his garbage pickup and who he keeps out. I even had a lover who pulled out my diaphragm and threw it against the wall.

When the narrator attempts to establish the kind of independence she sees in men, who leave their wives at home every day to venture into a wider world of experience, she is shocked by the immediate resistance to her push. "I was not asking for the world—only an apartment in town—away from the telephone and weeds. I had picked one out. It faced a brick courtyard and bushes that hid the alley. One room and a kitchen—just big enough. I have never been good at decisions. Finally, I came home and forgot all about separate quarters. Wives have time to stare out windows, and we have windows in every room. I keep hoping my thoughts will come together. So far, all I have to show for my time is a crystal ashtray full of Virginia Slims." For Seese, a language of dissidence allows her to confront the laziness of privilege.

In *Silences, Or A Woman's Life*, translated by Harry Matthews and published by Dalkey in 2012, Marie Chaix offers the vision of a woman looking at her mother. She approaches the vastness of a life that played out across the terrible 20th century. A narrator addresses her dying mother, confined to bed, unconscious: "Did you ever once break your silence and shout out loud? Did you ever ask yourself how those ears could trample down your heart without having anything named or explained?" Later, Chaix adopts the Penelope motif explicitly: "My life is a worn-out fabric. In places it's threadbare, elsewhere it's unraveling. I try and sew it up again, patching holes, reknitting loose threads. Sometimes I re-embroider it, and then the colors get mixed up or overlap and make new patterns and shadows. What will you make of

them?" Through this interrogation, Chaix breaks the silence.

The list of waiting games persists through the Dalkey canon. In the Dalkey work of Chae Man-Sik, high modernist Korean novels, waiting takes the aspect of "women's work," with men expecting their wives to "wait upon them." Women are forced to perform traditional roles they no longer recognize. The urbane mid-century British, Christine Brooke-Rose writes a world where secretaries wait on men, and women wait on their husbands, and wait for cars to bring them to their next engagements, to hair appointments. Dalkey even addresses the concept explicitly. In *Reading Games*, Kimberley Bohman-Kalaja discusses the way "waiting" becomes the defining constraint for Beckett's *Godot*. This sensation is universal in contemporary life, but women writers, like Vladimir and Estragon, must make their own fun.

Helene Cixous picks up on this recurring modernist motif of waiting in her examination of the visual artist Maria Chevska. In *K- A Notebook*, a 2005 monograph about the work, Cixous looks at the sensation of waiting as it relates to the exile and the political asylum seeker. Chevska and Cixous track the textiles that circulate information across the world with impunity, while bodies are stopped at borders. To open up this metaphor, Cixous and Chevska draw on Kafka's parable "Before the Law," from *The Trial*. Exiles, like Joseph K., wait before a door that will never open.

From *K- A Notebook*:

You say the theatre of K's dream. Of K? Of Kafka? Of someone who suddenly had to flee. Or else is in front of the Law's gate, the building, or in front of the gate of a book or town, and who doesn't dare go in. But...

The trouble is there's no door. Where's the door? We see the walls clearly, the windows, the floors, but no door.

You, who wanders, are you inside? are you outside? Who are you, invisible subject of the enigma?

Are you the person they refused to allow in?

III.

As the history of *écriture féminine* reveals, this tradition is founded in friction against boundaries. And as such, experiments in the Penelope story necessarily open up new erotic possibilities. If no one is going anywhere, we might as well have fun while we wait. Carole Maso, the novelist and essayist, has published numerous books with Dalkey Archive Press. Her work exemplifies the geographies of desire that emerge through repetition, parataxis, and catalog. She swoons in excess. In a 1997 interview with Dalkey Archive, she says:

Writing, for me, is a significant human adventure; it is about exploration and investigation and meditation. It's about the search for a legitimate language. It's about the search for beauty and integrity and wholeness. For meaning, where maybe there is none. A work of fiction

should be a genuine experience, I think, and not (as it most often is) a record of an experience. I feel very sorry, actually, for the other kind of writer. There's something dead in them, something (as Virginia Woolf said of Sackville West's work) that fails to vibrate. And what is life and writing about if not to "vibrate."

Maso presents an encounter that expands, a literature of engagement. Her novels are traces, machines, and palimpsests that produce meaning as they circulate between bodies. She says, "I think the work feeds the choices I make in my life and my life feeds the choices I make in my work. And to one degree or another that has always been the case. Each completely creates the other at this point. It's an odd thing. The creative impulse runs through us all, I think. You don't have to be a writer or an artist to make, re-make, celebrate, relish, transcend, destroy, rehearse, re-imagine, begin again. It's the becoming I love. Whether I'm writing or not, it's the same thing. This extraordinary journey."

In *AVA*, Maso quotes Cixous: "The ideal, or the dream, would be to arrive at a language that heals as much as it separates." Maso revels in the tension between beauty and ugliness that emerges from the compulsive pursuit of pleasure, "You spoke of Trieste. Of Constantinople. You pushed the curls from your face. We drank Five-Star Mextaca on the Island of Crete and aspired to the state of music. / Olives hang like earrings. / A throbbing. A certain pulsing. / The villagers grew violets." Maso writes of the love between women. This presents an almost assumed alterity. In *Aureole*, she plays with a dictionary of French euphemisms, "women washing lentils," "She opens *The Book of Slang*." She reads: "Vagina may be called *le abricot*—the apricot. *Le barbou*—the bearded one. *Le bijou de famille*—the family jewel. *La bonbonnière*. *La chagatte*." Maso's games call up passion and heartache. And the waiting doesn't seem as bitter.

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The featured image: Penelope Cruz cries tears of rage in Almodovar's *Volver*