

The Weary Sons of Freud. Catherine Clément. London and New York: Verso, 1987, 115 pages, \$11.95.

Reviewed by Michael Walsh, University of Hartford

Those North American intellectuals who resist the influence of recent French thought will sometimes propose that the ideas of such figures as Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Lacan are meaningful only within the context of their native culture. Such an argument is sometimes phobic, often reactionary, and usually easy to dismiss. Yet in reading Catherine Clément's *The Weary Sons of Freud* (a translation somewhat lacking in the dash of the original *Les Fils De Freud Sont Fatigués*) we may find ourselves meditating nonetheless on the extent to which each national culture is marked by its own discursive idiosyncracies, its own peculiarly extended discussions and debates. I say this because the basic project of Clément's book is to demolish a target that can barely be said to exist in English-speaking cultures; the weary sons are those psychoanalysts influenced by Lacan who have abandoned the clinic and the concept of the cure in order to devote themselves to writing theoretically showy studies of culture.

This is not to say that the book is without interest. As a member of Lacan's Seminar and of the French Communist Party, as a feminist and a professor of philosophy, Clément is situated at the crux of much that has been significant in French intellectual life over the last twenty-five years. Her prose is good-humored and vivid, and she has few rivals in the typically disappointing genre of intellectual journalism. While certain of her thematics seem a little shopworn (the analyst/shaman comparison, the interdependence of psychological normality and abnormality), others are refreshing (the assertion that no one really owns ideas). Nor is it in principle so difficult to sympathize with a critique of theoretical overproduction. However, the potentially analogous subcultures in North American intellectual life (Derrideans, Lacanians in film theory, participants in the discussion of postmodernism) are not groups who can usefully be accused of abandoning practice in favor of theory. While I will go on to question Clément's distinction between theory and practice on first principles, the immediate point is that the strictures of her basic argument do not cross the Atlantic especially productively.

The result is that we are less likely to focus on the critique of the Lacanians and more likely to speculate on Clément's own motives in writing. Such speculation is actively encouraged by the personal revelations and confessional interchapters which do not merely punctuate the text but ultimately vie for importance with the more traditionally intellectual material. Thus, if Clément's opening gambit is to characterize the Lacanians as the *nouveaux riches* of the Parisian intelligentsia (an argument somewhat surprising in its deployment of *ancien-régime* disdain to Marxist ends) it is not long

before her account of becoming a philosopher situates her own father in that same class-fraction. Clément is quite intent on valorizing the cure, the clinic, and the patient, quite determined to take a satirical distance from the analyst as intellectual, and quite willing to personalize the discussion. Like D.W. Winnicott, Clément *père* is venerated as a true "healer" and congratulated for having no interest in the "social codes which have nothing to do with therapeutic practice: culture, literature, writing, talking in public."

If this personalizing tactic is an index of Clément's feminism, it also obliges us to pose a number of questions. In the first place, we might wonder whether this autobiographical tendency is necessarily the most productive direction for feminist criticism. Yet we must recognize that a number of feminist scholars have used personal recollection with some success; see, for example, Part 3 of Cora Kaplan's *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1987), another volume in this new Verso series on "Questions for Feminism." Secondly, we might wonder about the contradiction between Clément's signifier and her signified, the contradiction between the diverse activities of her text and the message that the making of many books is also vanity. At the same time, we should note that Clément herself remarks on this contradiction and at least tries to grapple with it. A third question emerges from an objection which seems more damaging to Clément's argument; how can we reconcile either her feminism or the activity of her text with the depth of her commitment to a very traditional notion of political practice?

At moments in reading *The Weary Sons of Freud*, one imagines Clément rewriting Marx's final thesis on Feuerbach to read: "Psychoanalysis has only interpreted the world; the point is to change it." At one point, she even congratulates a small group of analysts seen marching in a workers' demonstration; one may grant that political complacency is endemic to the professional classes, but one cannot so easily conclude that the answer is for analysts to take to the streets. What is missing from Clément's discussion is any suspicion that the Marxism which emphasizes such an unreconstructed notion of political practice has certainly been problematized, if not actually superannuated. And if Clément does not seem to recognize that the traditional Marxist distinction between theory and practice has become ossified and counterproductive, nor does she seem to doubt the value of such political examples for psychoanalysis. Yet her moral fervor seems distinctly misplaced. The relationship between theory and practice within psychoanalysis seems less comparable with that within Marxism and more comparable with the relationship between university teaching and research. Would Clément chastise professors of history or chemistry for abandoning their true vocation as teachers and indulging in research?

Beyond this, the question of Lacan, and rather suprisingly for a Seminarian of long standing, Clément seems intent on reversing a number of Lacan's most important theoretical advances. Ostensibly, Clément is not discussing Lacan at all, taking aim instead at the rather easier meat of his followers and imitators; yet the criticisms to which she most often returns might just as meaningfully be applied to Lacan himself. Take, for example, her unhappiness with the new status of language in Lacanian psychoanalysis, especially insofar as that status affects the relationship between patient and analyst: "But the patient who, in the laboratory of the psychoanalytic cure, secretes poetic jewels, as everyone can, at some turning-point of life, is not there to produce literature. But the patient is busy keeping roads open so that the conscious element in his history can be connected to the unconscious that has been blocking it at painful spots, and this patient doesn't give a damn about making it sound pretty (. . .); he may happen to be amazed at the words his unconscious puts into his mouth, but that still won't lead him to think that's what he came for" (p. 37).

Such a passage is startlingly regressive. Its fiction of the suffering patient mishandled by an analyst indifferent to everything but the incidentally poetic dimension of the patient's speech is premised on conceptions of literature, analysis, and the relationship between them which one might imagine to have been dissolved precisely by Lacan. For, as Clément herself recognizes, Lacan's attention to the language of the patient was always bound up with his convictions concerning the materiality and psychological pre-eminence of the signifier. Far from callously disregarding the reality of the patient's suffering, the Lacanian analyst understands that suffering precisely as the disposition of the patient in language. Thus, no genuine Lacanian can trivialize literature as Clément does in her assumption that it is a question of sounding "pretty." Clément may be right in saying that the proliferation of cultural studies by Lacanians has its indulgent and narcissistic aspects; she may also be right in saying that the disciples do not measure up to Lacan himself. However, neither perception should lead to the wholesale rejection of the larger cultural compass of Lacanian psychoanalysis; Lacan's reimagining of the position of language in the analytic relationship does indeed mean that analysis can learn from linguistics, from literature, from anthropology, etc.

Finally, then, the political values of *The Weary Sons of Freud* leave one with political questions. Is Clément's disdain for the Lacanians that of the disciplined Communist shocked by the self-importance of the theorists? Is it politically advisable for feminism to become identified with a version of common sense which at moments verges on anti-intellectualism? And why has a book published in France in 1978 now been translated and packaged as a volume in Verso's new series "Questions for Feminism"? The answers to this last question might include Clément's status as a feminist, and the success of other recent translations of her work, which are *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), and *The Newly-Born Woman* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986), the latter co-authored with Hélène Cixous. Nor should we overlook the power of those anti-psychoanalytic tendencies within feminism which might find a kind of sustenance in this book, even though, as I have said, Clément is not critical of psychoanalysis *per se* but of the extent to which its attention has turned toward cultural criticism. Finally and rather unfortunately, one notes the extent to which the arguments offered in *The Weary Sons of Freud* conform with those developed in the last two or three years by certain editors of *New Left Review*, a connection one makes insofar as Verso is the papercover imprint of New Left Books. "Questions For Feminism" is edited by a group of four women (Michele Barrett, Annette Kuhn, Ann Phillips, and Anne Jones) whose editorial policies and sexual politics must be carefully distinguished from those of *New Left Review*, those of New Left Books, and even those of the rest of the Verso list. It is also clear that their series will contain a variety of viewpoints; Cora Kaplan's book is far more enthusiastic about the role of psychoanalysis in the criticism of culture. Nonetheless, I found myself remarking on the congruence of Clément's arguments with those of Perry Anderson, whose *In The Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1983) offers a critique of the extent to which structuralism and post-structuralism have succeeded in displacing Marxism in French intellectual life. There is no doubt that Clément's book is a testament of disillusionment, and that the dissociation of theory and practice which it bemoans was peculiarly disorienting for those whose political hopes had been raised by the experiences of the late 1960s. Yet, as I have already asked, to what extent are such disappointments a valid warrant for the repudiation of the genuine theoretical advances of a period? In the case of Anderson, the problem is compounded by an alarming decline in the quality of scholarship; while certain of his earlier books remain models of scholarly procedure, *In The Tracks Of Historical Materialism* resorts to subterfuges as flimsy as the quotation from Lacan of

the first half of a sentence, "Je dis toujours la vérité" – "I always speak the truth." The arrogance and irrationalism with which Anderson twits Lacan is somewhat tempered by the second half of this sentence, which reads "pas toute, parce que toute la dire, on n'y arrive pas" – "but not the whole truth, because to say it all, there's no way" (Jacques Lacan, *Télévision*, Paris: Seuil, 1974, p. 9). I have tried to recognize the value of Clément's enterprise, which disappoints in the context of her other writing; I cannot be so generous to this particular book of Anderson's.