

CIXOUS VA BETWEEN LACAN AND DERRIDA

It is with great pleasure that I introduce this wonderful cluster of essays on the work of Hélène Cixous in its connection with psychoanalysis. The authors who accepted our ambitious invitation to meditate on the fruitful interaction have examined the entirety of Cixous's abundant corpus, but evince a predilection for her groundbreaking *Portrait of Dora*, the play that Jacques Lacan saw and praised warmly in March 1976, as Fernanda Negrete reminds us here. Written at the same time as the manifesto that launched the concept of *écriture féminine*, an essay written in 1974 and published in 1975 that since then has been anthologized endlessly, "The Laugh of the Medusa", *Portrait of Dora* stages a personal drama leading the heroine, the young hysteric, to deliver a slap in Freud's face.

Ventriloquizing through the famous young hysterical patient, Cixous subverts Freud's complacency and mastery, expanding the hints at a self-critique scattered in the footnotes of *A Case of Hysteria (Dora)*. Close to the end of a book published in 1905 discussing a case that was never completed, rather aborted some four years before, Freud confides: "I failed to guess in good time that her [Dora's] homosexual (gynaecophile) love for Frau K. was the strongest unconscious current in the life of her mind, and to tell her so. [...]. Before I had recognized the importance of the homosexual current in psychoneurotics, I often came to a dead end or found myself utterly bewildered in the treatment of such case." Seen in retrospect half a century later, it is undeniable that the work of Cixous has been successful in bringing a needed corrective to psychoanalysis, which explains both its durable appeal and its absorption in today's psychoanalytic doxa.

I can offer my personal testimony. I had contacted Cixous in 1969 to ask her to supervise an MA thesis on parody in *Finnegans Wake* that I completed in 1971. At the time, I was a student in Hamburg, Germany. And when the viva took place in Paris, we used three languages, French, English and German, in all of which Cixous was fluent, far more fluent than I was. The next year, back at my alma mater the Ecole Normale Supérieure of rue d'Ulm, I served as a mediator when Cixous was invited to teach one of the authors whose texts were on the reading list of the *agrégation*. This is how she came in the Spring of 1972 to deliver astonishing classes on Milton's *Comus*. For the small group of *normaliens* students studying for this demanding competitive examination, it was indisputable that her approach was

fundamentally psychoanalytic. Cixous asked us to read Freud's essay on the taboo of virginity, she quoted the excellent book by her close friend Angus Fletcher on allegory as a symbolic mode, but a literary one channeling the Freudian drives. Of course, she extensively referred to Fletcher's excellent work on Milton's *Comus*. I owe to this class my lasting love for Milton's early poetry.

After the agrégation, I went on to write a dissertation, also supervised by Cixous, on a crazy topic linking James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Hermann Broch; during the defense, she noted that they shared a central "O" through which I had threaded my dialectics. It seemed natural to me that she would be receptive to working with a corpus that was partly Germanophone; when I later supervised dissertations myself, I discovered how territorial other French professors could be. I had defended the dissertation in 1980 thanks to her repeated advice: "Write, write, write!" Having written the thousand pages required at the time, my speed allowed me to be made a full professor in 1981 when turning thirty-two. For a while, this granted me a lot of free time, and I used it to teach both at the university of Dijon, where I was located, and in Paris VIII Vincennes relocated in Saint-Denis. And once in a while I would go to hear Cixous's bi-monthly seminars; they lasted six hours, chock-full with amazing insights, exciting guests and bold new ideas. I also witnessed how she drew more and more scholars from all over the world.

Mentioning Paris VIII, one should remember that this was the first French university to have a Department of Psychoanalysis. Paris VIII, that notorious "experimental" university founded in the wake of May 1968 by Cixous, was called "Vincennes" for its location. "Vincennes" had a department of psychoanalytic studies, which was unheard of at the time in France. It was in the hands of Lacanians, Jacques-Alain and Judith Miller. It was in this context that Lacan gave a memorable lecture on politics to a crowd of unruly students on December 3, 1969. Lacan had been encouraged to be creative by a close friend of his, Héléne Cixous, when he was asked to write an essay on literature—punningly entitled "litureterre." The same issue of *Littérature* devoted to "literature and psychoanalysis" (number 3) contained a fragment from Cixous's *Portrait du Soleil*, a prose text already tackling the story of Freud's Dora.

In the same issue, Bernard Mérigot, one of the editors, asks: "Must psychoanalysis be taught in universities?" I note that the editors of the review were not all disciples of Lacan. Jean Bellemin-Noël, a member of the editorial committee, who worked on the links between psychoanalysis and literature, kept his distance. Another contributor was André Green who was by then a major disputant of Lacan's. Green took Lacan to task for being too linguistic: for Green, Lacan had forgotten the body, reducing its affects to signifiers in the name of structural linguistics.

We can turn to Paul Earlie's *Derrida and the Legacy of Psychoanalysis* to survey the debate between Lacan and Derrida, a controversy in which Cixous, along with a whole generation of scholars, was caught up. In the late sixties, one could be both "Derridean" and "Lacanian." Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva and Jacques-Alain

Miller were on both sides; then a split appeared in the mid seventies, after which one had to choose one's camp. I managed to sit on the fence by using a simple device: I would be a Derridean with the Lacanians and a Lacanian with the Derrideans. In fact, this entailed minimal intellectual contortions. The requirement to toe party-lines appeared more insistent in France, but I had moved to the US, where boundaries were murkier, if not porous.

The controversy seemed to allegorize a clash between philosophy and psychoanalysis; it hinged around the crucial concept of the "letter", a term that can be taken literally to point to writing and even literature, or else refer more strictly to those written messages we send out and that circulate on their own. This double meaning comes to the fore in Lacan's reading of the *The Purloined Letter*, the introductory essay that opens *Ecrits*. In his celebrated analysis, "Seminar on The Purloined Letter", Lacan imposed a structuralist grid on Poe's story that mapped out a pattern of displacements: by a series of permutations, each actor in the story stands for a distinct subject position. The subjects are subjects of unconscious desire determined by the Unconscious or discourse of the Other. They all follow the same sequence of actions. The structure achieves its effects by pushing along pure signifiers, in this case a letter that has been opened and read, then stolen and hidden, but whose contents are not disclosed; the letter allegorizes the itinerary of a signifier whose very signified remains inaccessible and irrelevant. What counted for Lacan were the places the characters occupied and the way they were caught up in a repetition automatism; the consequence was that the letter always reached its destination in the end.

In his polemics against Lacan's alleged Hegelian idealism, Derrida rejected such an economy, arguing that Lacan pretended to find at the end what he had hidden in plain sight, a phallus disguised as a letter. Lacan's reading of Poe, moreover, would only provide a modernized version of an interpretation of Poe's stories presented in a less sophisticated manner by Marie Bonaparte. The proximity that Derrida discovered was ironic given the scorn Lacan had poured on Bonaparte's heavy-handed psychobiography in his own Poe seminar.

It is important to note that Derrida's "*Le facteur de la vérité*" was published in *Poétique*, the review founded by Cixous and Tzvetan Todorov. The essay was reprinted in *The Post Card*, a book that engages in a systematic critique of psychoanalysis. The attack on Lacanian theory followed from a program sketched by Derrida in 1972 in *Positions*, a series of interviews in which Lacan was criticized for his glib use of Hegelian categories; his half-baked philosophical readings betrayed an undeclared idealism contradicting the way Lacan foregrounded the materiality of the signifier.

In 1975, Derrida added new reproaches. Lacan was accused of simplifying Poe's text, missing literary nuances, glossing over the intertextual plays elaborated in the Dupin stories. The objection was that Lacan had translated the absent content of the letter into a Freudian truth, a truth identical to the truth of psychoanalysis; it would reveal the phallus that had been hidden in the empty signifier of the letter.

The letter would merely appear as a sign of castration—that old and tired song of Freudian psychoanalysis.

The most scathing critique came when Derrida refuted Lacan's assertion that "a letter always reaches its destination." As he noted, letters can always get lost, stolen, burned or destroyed. Derrida rejected an all too ideal predestination. He played with letters in *The Postcard*, a tricky text in which he multiplied performatives, or "perver-formatives" using the mode of love letters. "Envois" is made up of fragments that remain from an amorous correspondence he had decided to destroy.

Of course, Cixous had moved to Derrida's camp, as is well-known. However, the fact that Lacan kept mentioning her "fondly" in 1976 testifies that he bore her no grudge, even when she made fun of Freud's fumbling treatment of Dora. Cixous also stayed close to psychoanalytic interrogations of writing, femininity and desire, as several of the contributors here show. Even though she has remained a faithful friend of the lamented philosopher, today, twenty years after his passing, she can recognize that their positions are not identical. In a breathtaking essay that concludes a huge compendium entitled, *Where is French philosophy going?*, Cixous quotes a "furious passage" from Derrida's *Circumfession* in which he takes Proust to task for having written the famous sentence: "A work in which there are theories is like an object on which one has left the price tag." Derrida is scathing here, railing against a "vulgar" rejection of theory that would betray Proust's snobbism, his adherence to an outmoded "Franco-Britannic decorum." Cixous explains that she felt "petrified" when she read the attack, Derrida's strictures debunking one of her favorite writers. In the rest of her spirited essay, she gives Proust his due, interjecting first that "theory" as deployed by Proust does not have the same meaning as Derrida's objection, then defending the whole writing process leading to "Time Regained", a space of writing in which "literature begins" because we do not know who is writing. Reclaiming a space for literature, she concludes that it is literature that thinks in its own manner and not under the modalities of philosophical discourse. Kleist, Montaigne and Kafka relay Proust. Rejecting the idea that there would be a specifically "French" way of thinking, Cixous asks us to follow her to her "island" or onto the moon.... Thus the gentle rebuttal facing Derrida's violent explosion is not made, obviously, in the name of psychoanalysis, but in the name of a literature without borders, a literature that rejects all signs of national identity. Instead of asking "where does French philosophy go?" (*Où va...?*), Cixous reduces the question to a minimalist prompt—just "Go!" (*Val!*), in which I hear an echo of her injunction: "Write!" Hence, let us follow her and accept her invitation, as the authors gathered here have done.

Jean-Michel Rabaté



As with Jean-Michel Rabaté, it is my pleasure to introduce these responses to our provocation to ‘helencixous’ with us in this special issue of *S Journal*. This neologism, a childhood invention of Jean-Michel Rabaté’s daughter, verb-alises something of the infrangible power of Hélène Cixous’s writings. Collected in this volume are responses from Cixous’s pre-eminent former students, translators, co-thinkers and readers. To ‘helencixous’, as the writers in this dossier demonstrate, means meticulously listening for the insistent voice and body of woman in the other scene of language and in Cixous’s works.

Opening the special issue with her essay, “Woman As More”, Juliet Flower MacCannell distinguishes Cixous’s actual position on sexual difference from the common misreadings based on essentialism and biologism. At a time when sex and gender are poised to re-become objects of a widespread reactionary agenda, Cixous’s fundamental insight, MacCannell explains, is to understand masculine and feminine as “orientations” toward language and its logic. The translator of Cixous’s ten-act play, *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia*, MacCannell describes Cixous’s strategy in terms of a poetic intervention that actuates the internal feminine energy and power of language, making it the site of conflict. MacCannell explains that “Cixous is committed to the struggle within language as such; to wresting the subject free from language by means of language itself.” In MacCannell’s assessment, Cixous remains a dedicated fighter for the unending “more” of woman.

For Mairéad Hanrahan, this feminine “more” inappears as a trace of something that has no trace, the scar of a wound whose source in the real is profoundly uncertain. In “*Manhattan*, or Literature as Eye-Patch”, Hanrahan recounts how Cixous’s difficulty of telling what really “happened” revolves around the *part* played by the resurfacing of the writer’s past. If it is the detail that causes the past to surge up in Cixous’s tragic memoir, it does so in an impossible way. The chance detail “simultaneously reveals and hides, buries and unburies”, Hanrahan explains, creating a topological distortion in space and time. A non-intentional agency, the letter is the carrier of and courier for a concatenating array of displacements, both within and without the tales making up Cixous’s literary corpus.

Out of these labyrinthine, interconnecting threads in Cixous’s work, Laurent Milesi focuses on a singular project, an unwritten and unwritable “thisbookIdontwrite” which, in not being written, “is everywhere and nowhere”. Both first cause and summation, this unwritten book haunts the rest of Cixous’s writings as an absence and an always missed encounter. Like a book in a dream, this unwritten book “hesitates”, as Milesi puts it in his “Helene Cixous’s Missed Encounter with the Real”, between the Imaginary and the Real, leaking from one order into the other like the dream of the burning child in Freud. Resonant with but not reducible to Lacan’s notion of the Real, Cixous’s “true dreaming” of the BookIdonotwrite figures

as an infinitely productive “blind spot” in a scene of writing out of which the “I” is constitutively evacuated.

Dreams also figure prominently in Bryan Counter’s exploration of Proustian themes in Cixous, and particularly in her books *Philippines* and *Reirements* where representation leads us not towards but away from sense. In “Reading, Dreaming, Writing in Proust and Cixous”, Counter closely analyses passages where he finds Cixous’s writing coming vertiginously close to a dream state in writing. Dream-writing conjures up telepathic logics, where facts are passively “sensed”, Counter proposes, “with an immanent value that resists the kind of interpretation we normally like to undertake.” What this calls for is another principle of reading: as a *treatment* through which dreams breathe through us.

As if mysteriously summoned by this dreaming-reading-breathing work, Fernanda Negrete invites us to attend to dance as a “conceptual presence” in Cixous. Negrete’s essay, “Cixous’s and Lacan’s Dances”, traces the body as an exuberant dissident player in the signifiatory regime, its gestures breaking into and cutting up dominant modes of address. Traversed by circularity, repetition and non-linearity, the practice of psychoanalysis itself, Negrete proposes, is a field of dance “where movement undoes the illusion of a consolidated, unified whole [...] as well as rewriting unprecedented lines, or taking unforeseeable steps.” In Negrete’s estimation, *Portrait of Dora* emerges primarily as a gesture, which, like Roni Horn’s photographs and Nancy Spero’s leaping, darting women, are among several of Cixous’s works of “portraiture” whose premise draws on dance’s episodic curving movements in a whole scale “flooding” of the linearity of the book.

Closing out the special topic, Cindy Zeiher reflects on what endures in Cixous’s enigmatic phrase, “écriture féminine”. Like Negrete, Zeiher turns to *Portrait of Dora* and, in particular, to Dora’s famous slap, as her entryway to an extended meditation on play and playing, writing and politics. Citing Cixous’s intriguing suggestion, “I am what Dora would have been if women’s history had begun”, Zeiher sees Cixous’s personification of Dora as activating the full resources of hysteria as a specifically political platform in order to speak of “what writing will do”.

In the non-thematic sections of this volume, we find Julian Browne’s self-dialogic, writerly analysis of the “un-forgetting” haunting family self-representation initiated by his reading of Lacan’s *Seminar XIII*. In the figure of the Infanta located at the heart of the familial (self-)portrait of Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*, Browne locates a “pas de sujet”, an “unladylike” absence. Nothingness also preinhabits politics and sexual difference in the final contribution to this volume. In this increasingly germane discussion of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, and James Baldwin’s reinscription of Wright in *Notes of a Native Son*, Mikko Tuhkanen focuses on moments of political awakening where the characteristic self-isolation of the modern individual is suddenly electrified with what Lacan calls the *tuché*, which Tuhkanen glosses as a moment “when the real disorients the structure”. If such awakenings to an experience of “bound togetherness” carry the threat of incipient fascism, Tuhkanen dis-

covers in Lacan's Antigone something the totalitarian fantasy will constitutively never grasp: an inassimilable singularity.

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Sigi Jöttkandt

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