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MANHATTAN,
OR LITERATURE AS EYE-PATCH

As its sub-title announces, Cixous's *Manhattan: Lettres de la préhistoire* [*Manhattan: Letters from prehistory*] is profoundly concerned with the traces that survive of an early experience of which, paradoxically, no traces apparently survive. The narrator herself explicitly foregrounds the importance—"tant langagier [...] tant littéral que métaphorique que psychanalytique" [as much a matter of language [...] as much literal as metaphoric as psychoanalytical]—of the theme of the scar as the vestige of a traumatic event: "trauma, trace d'une blessure, tissu fibreux visible ou invisible qui remplace réellement ou allégoriquement une perte de substance qui donc n'est pas perdue mais suppléée, bourrelet mnésique" [trauma, trace of a wound, the visible or invisible fibrous tissue replacing really or allegorically a loss of substance that therefore is not lost but supplemented, a protrusion of memory].¹ Indeed, she goes so far as to theorise that "la Littérature tout entière est cicatricielle. Elle célèbre la plaie et redit la lésion" [Literature in its entirety is a scar tissue. It celebrates the wound and retells the injury] (*Manhattan*, 189). The scar is as much a key motif in the diegesis as it is in her discourse, insofar as the one indelible memory of the event whose significance for the narrator *Manhattan* as a whole explores, her love affair in 1964 (thus her prehistory in the sense that at that point in time she had not yet ever published anything) in New York with a young man named Gregor, concerns a scar on his chest: "je n'ai jamais oublié et n'oublierai jamais la cicatrice sur la poitrine" [I have never forgotten and will never forget the scar on his chest] (*Manhattan*, p. 38). However, just as Proust's narrator wonders, had Gilberte Swann not had such black eyes, if maybe he would not have been so "plus particulièrement amoureux, en elle, de ses yeux bleus" [much particularly in love, in her, with her blue eyes], so too this one unforgettable memory is profoundly unreliable. The quotation continues: "je n'ai jamais oublié et n'oublierai jamais la cicatrice sur la poitrine que pourtant je n'ai jamais vue mais que j'ai bien cru voir crue. Cruvoir" [I have never forgotten and will never forget the scar on his chest that I nonetheless never saw but believed I saw raw]² (*Manhattan*, p. 38). Literature, apparently, involves revisiting an apparent wound in the place of a real but forever unknowable one.

Nonetheless, *Manhattan* is partly rather than primarily about this substitutive property of literature. In his analysis of the text as a reflection on the creation of a Cixous archive by the Bibliothèque nationale at the time she was writing the book, Jacques Derrida proposes that the challenge posed by Cixous's work to the library that will henceforward aspire to contain it lies not in its pointing to a hidden secret but in its "structure bifide qui peut garder en réserve indécidable cela même qu'elle avoue, montre, manifeste, exhibe, expose à n'en plus finir" [forked structure that can undecidably keep in reserve the very thing it endlessly confesses, shows, manifests, exhibits, exposes].³ At issue is not a manifestly false replacement that serves to highlight the impossibility of ever accessing the truth. For Derrida, Cixous's radical achievement lies in the extent to which her text makes it impossible to decide between the true and the false. Building on his insight, I seek in what follows to explore the implications of—in my view—the most remarkable aspect of *Manhattan*: its exploration not of screen or false memories but of the part (not just role, but a specifically partial role) that the resurfacing of the past plays not only in Cixous becoming Cixous, but in the creation of any literary oeuvre.

Manhattan's second chapter introduces the event that appears to have catalysed the writing of the book: the sudden resurfacing in the narrator's memory, on April 6 2001, of the eye-patch that Gregor had worn when she met him in New York on January 1 1965 following an operation. On the same page as the much-quoted sentence where she sums up "l'histoire que devrait raconter Le Récit" [the (hi) story that the Narrative should tell] first in two words: "*folie littérature*" [madness literature] and then "plus exactement" [more precisely]—and untranslatably, given the homophony in French between the *fo-* that begins the word for mad and *faux*, false—in a single one: "folittérature" [falliterature], she states: "J'avais *totalelement oublié* le détail *ungeheuer* du *cache-oeil*" [I had *totally forgotten* the *ungeheuer* detail of the *eye-patch*] (*Manhattan*, p. 38).

What does it mean to be "totally forgotten"? The paradox is unmistakable: a detail that one remembers having totally forgotten cannot, logically speaking, be totally forgotten. Has she rather then *partially* forgotten the detail? I shall return shortly to the relationship between detail and totality; first let us note that the narrator not only immediately contrasts this detail with the above-mentioned chest scar that she claims never to have forgotten, but then elaborates, in a page-long sentence broken up into six paragraphs, on the difference between the various kinds of details:

J'y noterai les surgissements totalement inattendus de détails totalement oubliés. Détails dramatiques à l'époque mais emportés par le temps, jamais réapparus, et sans suite dans mon histoire,

contrairement à d'autres comme le détail dit de « l'écureuil à demi enfoui » dont on peut suivre la trace et moi aussi à travers presque tous mes textes, soit sous forme d'une réinscription directe, soit sous forme d'allégorie, ou de

métaphore, contrairement aux détails ineffacés et depuis intériorisés, fétichisés, pas du tout idolâtrés mais récurrents, familiers, inséparables

ces détails qui ne sont pas entrés dans mes livres mais dans l'oubli le plus inerte, qui n'ont pas donné lieu à des rêves, n'ont pas eu de descendance repérable,

ont, pourtant, [...]

ont, pourtant, [...]

ont, pourtant, j'en reçois la preuve des années plus tard, arpenté mon existence, mon histoire, à mon insu.

[I shall note there the totally unexpected resurfacings of totally forgotten details. Details that were dramatic when they happened but carried away by time, never reappeared, with no follow-up in my (hi)story,

in contrast with others like the detail called "the half-buried squirrel" whose trace can be followed including by me throughout nearly all my texts, either as a direct reinscription, or in the form of an allegory, or a metaphor, in contrast with the unerased details that since have been interiorized, fetishized, not at all worshipped but recurrent, familiar, inseparable

those details that didn't go into my books but into the most inert forgetfulness, that didn't give way to dreams, had no identifiable issue,

have, nevertheless, [...]

have, nevertheless, [...]

have, nevertheless, I am finding the proof many years later, travelled through my existence, my (hi)story, unbeknownst to me.] (*Manhattan*, p. 39)

As the repetition of "pourtant" [nevertheless] emphasises, a further paradox is at play here: the details that in the first paragraph are declared to be "sans suite dans mon histoire", are in the last paragraph proclaimed nonetheless to have marked "mon existence, mon histoire" unbeknownst to her. In addition, a further apparent opposition between the details that left traces in the narrator's texts and those that rather fell into the most "inert" forgetfulness is similarly unstable. For while the final "mon existence, mon histoire" appears to map the first opposition onto a difference between her books and her life, the fact that "histoire" means not only "history" but "story" makes the idea that the "totally forgotten" details can reliably be distinguished from those she has not only been aware of, but exploiting throughout her writing career, untenable. The distinction between the different sorts of details is as uncertain as that obtaining in *À la recherche du temps perdu* between voluntary and involuntary memory.

What is at stake here, then, is a partial distinction between different types of detail, that is, between different types of part. This partial distinction is superbly crystal-

lized in the overlap between the signifiers of the details chosen as representatives of the two categories, insofar as the last syllable of *cache-oeil* sounds the same as that of *écur-euil*: far from being opposed to the squirrel, the patch half appears in it. The two de-tails share the same tail. In addition to their commonality at the level of the signifier, they overlap figuratively, as the lines immediately following the long quotation above make clear:

Est remonté ultime du tréfonds et d'un seul coup de queue à ma surface
premièrement le détail « cache-œil »

la chose, précise, a un nom que je ne connais pas.

[Finally rose up from the depths to my surface with a single lash of its tail
the detail “eye-patch”

the precise thing has a name I don't know.] (p. 40)

The *cache-oeil* surfaces with “un seul coup de queue”, a lash of its tail. It too is in part animal.

This last detail is of particular significance in that it helps to explain the claim made at the beginning of the long quotation—a surprising claim, for anyone who has read many of Cixous's books—that the squirrel has left recurrent traces, verging on the ubiquitous, throughout her corpus (“throughout nearly all my texts, either as a direct reinscription, or in the form of an allegory, or a metaphor”). To the extent that the half-buried (“à demi enfoui”) squirrel can be traced throughout her writing, it is because it features there half-buried, as a passage that makes an explicit comparison between the squirrel and Goya's famous portrait of the half-buried dog subsequently elaborates:

Avec les écureuils j'étais bien. Je parle leur langue. [...] Les dieux vivants totalement innocents de mort et de vie comme mort voilà ce qu'ils sont à jamais pour moi depuis l'écureuil-premier, l'Écureuil de Central Park, à demi enterré, dont j'ai retrouvé le portrait au Prado tel qu'il fut peint par Goya d'après sa nature angoissée personnelle.

[I felt good with the squirrels. I speak their language. [...] Living gods totally innocent of death and of life as death that is what they have been for me ever since the first-squirrel, the Squirrel of Central Park, half buried, whose portrait I found again in the Prado as it was painted by Goya according to his personal anguished nature.] (*Manhattan*, p. 96)

If the portrait of the dog that figures in many of Cixous's texts can be considered a portrait of the squirrel, her text is indeed full of allegorical or metaphorical squirrels. For example, another (half-)portrait of the squirrel is similarly identifiable in another detail to which *Manhattan* frequently returns, the engraving mentioned on the first page of Kafka's “Metamorphosis” as hanging on the bedroom wall of the Gregor Samsa of whom Cixous's Gregor is a troubling counterfeit or double. Like Goya's dog, this representation of “une dame avec toque de fourrure et *boa* de

fouurrure et le bras tendu vers le lecteur disparaissant dans un épais manchon de fouurrure” [a lady with a fur hat and fur *boa* with her hand stretched out towards the reader disappearing in a thick fur muff] (*Manhattan*, p. 49) evokes a strong association with the half-buried squirrel. But so too, it could be argued, is the case for so many of the multitudinous “métaphores animales” [animal metaphors] that proliferate not only in *Manhattan* (*Manhattan*, p. 131) but in Cixous’s other books. Moreover, there is no logical reason why other, non-animal, details—including, as above, an eye-patch—should not be included in these allegorical or metaphorical squirrels. The chain of signification knows no end.

But does it know a beginning? Here the juxtaposition of allegory and metaphor is significant: while both tropes are defined by the supplementation of their literal meaning with a figurative one (typically on the basis of a partial similarity), allegory is usually considered to have a more clearly determinable final intention, a more rigorously determined ultimate meaning, than metaphor. While this is certainly the case in contemporary theories of metaphor, the difference was arguably less clear in the theory of the New Criticism, dominant in the sixties, whose conception of the distinction between “tenor” and “vehicle” in effect envisaged metaphor as a form of allegory. Moreover, the importance of the question of allegory in *Manhattan* is explicitly signalled by mentions (*Manhattan*, p. 169 and p. 235) of an Angus Fisher, author of *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, whose name bears a striking (partial) similarity with that of the (real) Angus Fletcher who had recently published a monograph with that title at the time of the narrator’s encounter with Gregor, a work which argued that allegory obtained much more widely across literature than had generally been considered and explored how the border between allegory and other tropes defied any attempt to fix it categorically.⁴ The quotation above from *Manhattan* certainly appears to privilege the squirrel as the allegorical or privileged meaning of the dogs/other animals/eye-patches etc. that proliferate throughout Cixous’s works, and furthermore to suggest the existence of an original squirrel, an “écureuil premier” or first squirrel, an Ur-squirrel, the half-buried one that forcefully affected her in New York precisely at the time of the love affair that she recounts in *Manhattan*. Yet the privilege granted “the Squirrel of Central Park” too is only a part of the picture, thrown into question by other passages. The half-buried position of the squirrel that presumably motivates the comparison with Goya’s dog in turn has another meaning:

(épisode de l’écureuil demi-entfoué que j’avais cru horriblement mort étouffé, la queue seule dressée comme celle d’un géant scandinave demeurant comme un défi visible sur la terre. Et après quelques minutes d’angoisse car je voyais là une allusion cruelle à ce qui attendait Gregor, le demi-mort était sorti soudain parfaitement vivant de cet enterrement.)

[(episode of the half-buried squirrel that I had thought horribly dead smothered, only its tail standing up like that of a Scandinavian giant remaining like a visible challenge on earth. And after a few minutes of anguish because I saw there a cruel allusion to the fate awaiting Gregor, the half-dead

creature had suddenly emerged from his burial perfectly alive).] (*Manhattan*, p. 187)

If this first squirrel so affected her, it was because she saw in it an allusion to the fate about to befall Gregor, the young writer suffering from tuberculosis with whom she had fallen in love. In other words, this first squirrel affected her so deeply because it served as an image of something else: it was itself already a metaphor. Furthermore, the strange upside-down posture itself also serves as a citation, evoking a posture adopted not in “life” but in literature. It recalls the supine position in which Kafka’s Gregor Samsa finds himself on awakening as an insect (an allusion already echoing in Cixous’s previously-mentioned description of the *cache-oeil* with the word “*ungeheuer*”, the adjective used to describe the “vermin” in the opening line of Kafka’s story): “Le jeune homme, désespéré, scarabée sur le dos. L’homme sur le dos est semblable à un écureuil sur le dos semblable à une tortue sur le dos: il est dans la position du mourir” [The young man, desperate, a beetle on its back. The man on his back is like a squirrel on its back like a tortoise on its back: he is in the position of dying] (*Manhattan*, p. 114).

“Le fait est que tout y est métaphore et peut-être que tout n’y est que métaphore” [The fact is that all is metaphor there and perhaps all is only metaphor there] (*Manhattan*, p. 69): *Manhattan* is in this sense profoundly concerned with the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of distinguishing between allegory and metaphor, that is, of ascertaining the status of the hidden or secret meaning evoked by a figure. The relation between the squirrel in Central Park and all the other squirrels, literal and metaphorical, that repeat it throughout Cixous’s works is structurally similar to the relation between this forgotten love affair from her pre-writing past and her subsequent writing career. If the text invites its reader to see in this extra-textual, extra-literary affair the origin of the narrator’s literary production, it is because she herself believes in the existence of a primary cause:

Je crois au commencement. Je crois au commencement d’entre les commencements. Je crois que parmi tous les commencements qui ont donné finalement naissance au premier de mes textes, celui qui est sorti vivant du chaos, [...] je crois, mais sans aucune certitude, qu’il y en a un, qui a causé, un qui a accidenté le chaos, un événement entre tous les événements, qui a coché l’âme profondément. Sans aucune certitude.

C’est à cette encoche que je pense. C’est à cette blessure parmi les plaies.

Je crois en tout cas à une *Ursache*.

[I believe in the beginning. I believe in a beginning among beginnings. I believe that among all the beginnings that finally gave birth to the first of my texts, the one that emerged alive from the chaos, [...] I believe, but with no certainty, that there is one of them that caused, one that took shape in the chaos, an event among all the events, that deeply gouged my soul. With no certainty.

It's that gouge I'm thinking of. That wound among wounds.

In any case I believe in an *Ursache*.] (*Manhattan*, p. 111)

She believes that her “*folie littérature*” has a non-literary origin. But she believes “sans aucune certitude”, and the text as a whole explores the impossibility of ever identifying that origin with any certainty. In inviting us to read this story as the narrative of what happened before she told stories, as a history of what caused her to write stories, the book tempts us in the same way she finds herself tempted: “Parfois, je suis tentée de dire: voici la Cause. *Die Ursache*” [Sometimes I am tempted to say: here is the Cause. *Die Ursache*] (*Manhattan*, p. 44). But time after time the conclusion we have been encouraged to reach is undermined. This is exemplified most clearly in the scene in which the narrator first meets Gregor, the scene therefore at the origin of their (original) love affair, which turns out to be the scene of a different wound (to an eye rather than a chest), to a different eye (her own) from that covered by Gregor's eye-patch, in a different library (the Beinecke in Yale). Gregor reaches out to the narrator when he sees a tear in her eye, caused by the sharp pain of a speck of dust caught in her contact lens. But, ashamed to “laisser voir un secret de salle de bains touchant une partie très sensible du corps” [reveal a bathroom secret concerning a very sensitive part of the body] (*Manhattan*, p. 101), she attributes the tear to the grief she felt as a

jeune mère traversée par la pensée de la mort de mon fils que je n'avais pas pleuré en réalité, au contraire, car sa mort n'était pas une simple mort et elle avait eu lieu dans une région qui se situe très au-delà de la scène des larmes.

[young mother traversed by the thought of the death of my son over which I had not in reality wept, on the contrary, for his death was not a simple death and it had taken place in a region located very far beyond the scene of tears.] (*Manhattan*, p. 102)

The narrator attributes a false origin to her tear. Yet the false origin in turn masks a true one; she later claims that the lie is the only way open to her of weeping for the loss of her son: “en mentant j'avais dit une vérité si profondément cachée en moi-même qu'elle n'aurait jamais pu jaillir sinon déguisée en mensonge” [in lying I had told a truth that was so deeply hidden within myself that it could never have been able to gush out except disguised as a lie] (*Manhattan*, p. 102). She herself is fundamentally unable to determine if the “cause” she ascribes to the tear is entirely fictional or not.

“Toute cette histoire tourne autour d'un œil, tantôt un des yeux d'un personnage, tantôt un des yeux de l'autre personnage” [This whole story turns around an eye, sometimes one of one character's eyes, sometimes one of the other character's eyes] (*Manhattan*, p. 43): the privilege awarded a few pages previously to the totally forgotten “détail *ungeheuer* du *cache-oeil*” was profoundly misleading insofar as another—or the other—eye subsequently heaves into view in the narrative as having played a critically determining role in the story it tells. The use of the verb “tourne”

[turn] in this last quotation is noteworthy: just as one eye (wearing an eye-patch) gives way to its double (an eye wearing a lens), so the text foregrounds one by one in turn a whole series of details, a textual practice it moreover explicitly draws to the reader's attention:

Détails qui occupent la totalité de la scène, dans la mesure où si grand soit le paysage on ne voit plus que le détail donc agrandi à la dimension du Tout :

Le *Couvre-Oeil* (totalement oublié) qui obture l'oeil atteint de cécité provisoire ou définitive de Gregor lors de la fameuse intervention chirurgicale. [...]

Le *demi-écureuil* [...]

La *gravure prémonitoire*, dans la petite chambre humaine de Gregor Samsa représentant une dame avec toque de fourrure et *boa* de fourrure et le bras tendu vers le lecteur disparaissant dans un épais manchon de fourrure

La Cicatrice sur la poitrine de G. Hamlet le 1er Janvier 1965, King's Crown Hotel.

La *lanterne magique* qui projette sur les murs de la *chambre* du narrateur, G.(olo) [...]

Lanterne magique projetant également G. en 1964 sur les rideaux sales de la chambre 91 à New York (à suivre...). (*Manhattan*, pp. 48-9)

[Details occupying the totality of the scene, insofar as no matter how big the landscape one can no longer see anything but the detail thus magnified to the dimension of Whole: – The *Eye-Patch* (totally forgotten) that blocks out the eye affected by Gregor's provisional or definitive blindness at the time of the famous surgical intervention. [...]

The *half-squirrel* [...]

The *premonitory engraving*, in Gregor Samsa's little human room representing a lady with a fur hat and fur *boa* with her hand stretched out towards the reader disappearing in a thick fur muff.

The scar on G.'s chest. Hamlet on January 1 1965, King's Crown Hotel.

The *magic lantern* projecting onto the walls of the narrator's *room*, G.(olo) [...]

Magic lantern similarly projecting G. in 1964 onto the dirty curtains of room 91 in New York (to be continued...). (*Manhattan*, pp. 48-9)

The narrative thus alerts us discursively to the sequence of thematic details whose significance it explores, each of which opens in turn onto its own separate series of displacements (the squirrel and the dog, the patch and the scar, etc.). *Manhattan* is in fact also a treatise on the detail, a double in certain respects of Naomi Schor's

seminal *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* that some years previously had itself drawn in some detail on Cixous in its exploration of the shift that it argues took place with realism from an earlier conception of the detail as sublatale, subordinate to the harmony of the whole, to one in which the concrete materiality of the detail resists all totalisation.⁵ “Le Détail fait la tragédie” [The Detail is what makes the tragedy] (*Manhattan*, p. 47): for Cixous, the sense of the tragic is inseparable from its concretisation in a detail that finds itself “agrandi à la dimension du Tout” in becoming visible, as for example with Kafka’s engraving:

Le Détail est un schibboleth visuel, terrible à voir. Qui le voit ne s’en remet pas. La plupart du temps on passe devant le Détail sans le voir la première fois que l’on entre dans le Récit. Dans l’histoire il est perdu dans la multitude des signes. C’est seulement après bien des années que j’ai remarqué le Détail qui donne accès à la *Métamorphose* (*die Verwandlung*) et pourtant il est bien placé à l’entrée où il végète et pue, éternel cadavre posté en avertissement au lecteur. Mais comme il ne crie ne geint ne grince le visiteur avide passe en coup de vent indifférent devant la vignette prophétique et se jette dans la pièce de devant d’où l’on ne sort plus vivant. Il eût suffi de lire l’avertissement et Tout ne serait pas arrivé. (pp. 47-8)

[The Detail is a visual schibboleth, terrible to see. Whoever sees it does not recover from it. Most of the time one goes past the Detail without seeing it the first time one enters the Narrative. In the story it is lost in the multitude of signs. It’s only after many years that I noticed the Detail that gives access to *Metamorphosis* (*die Verwandlung*) and yet it is clearly placed at the entry where it vegetates and stinks, an eternal corpse posted as a warning to the reader. But as it neither screams nor moans nor squeaks the eager visitor passes by the prophetic vignette in an indifferent gust and leaps into the front room from which nobody emerges alive. It would have been enough to read the warning for the Whole not to happen.] (pp. 47-8)

The detail accounts for the (tragic) impact of the story, its materiality serving to cast into relief something that would otherwise remain buried, unnoticed. However, rather than a full disinterment it only ever *half*unburies it:

Mais par définition magique le Détail cache ce qu’il montre. On *peut* toujours voir la gravure découpée par Gregor Samsa et encadrée exprès dans le cadre doré de la première page du Récit, mais justement on ne la voit toujours pas toujours on ne la voit pas. La loi des Détails, comment en penser la ruse ? Elle crève les yeux.

[But by magical definition the Detail hides what it shows. One *can* always see the engraving cut out by Gregor Samsa and framed deliberately in the golden frame of the Narrative’s first page, but precisely one still does not see it always one does not see it. How to grasp the cunning of the law of Details? It is blindingly obvious.] (p. 48)

The detail simultaneously reveals and hides, buries and unburies, just as the eye wearing a lens destined to make the world more visible is doubled by an eye wearing a patch that blocks it out. Similarly, the very act or fact of highlighting or unburying one detail—magnifying it “à la dimension du Tout”—simultaneously occludes or buries another. This is most brilliantly exemplified at the level of the signifier. By its use of italics and quotation marks, Cixous’s writing draws attention to the link between the tails of *cache-oeil* and *écureuil*. But in doing so it distracts the reader from the many other displacements that connect other parts of these words to others. For example, *cache* forms the tail of *Ursache*, whose head in turn can be heard in *écureuil* and in *gravure*. Indeed, from the earliest pages of the book Cixous signals clearly that there is no syllable ultimately more determining than any other, that the Ur-syllable—that is, the syllable *ur*—is missing: “au lieu de me retrouver sauvée à mon b-eau (comme je nomme mon b(ur)eau dans mes notes) je me vois en réalité sur le chemin de Certes” [instead of finding myself saved at my b-eau (as I name my b(ur)eau in my notes) I see myself in reality on the way to Certes] (p. 11).

This quotation overtly links the absence of any letters that can securely be identified as more original or primary than others to the contradiction explored in *Manhattan*’s opening chapter from its very first paragraph, the fact that the narrator finds herself going to Certes—an anagram of *Secret*, as she later points out (p. 34)—in spite of herself:

Je ne voulais pas aller à Certes et j’y allais côte à côte avec mon frère je fais toujours ce que je ne voulais pas faire pensais-je je suis en état de péché c’est jour de Pâques le premier jour de passage au lieu de passer de mon côté je passe de l’autre côté—regarderegarde comme c’est beau disait mon frère je regardai

[I did not want to go to Certes and I was going there alongside my brother I always do what I didn’t want to do I thought I am in a state of sin it is Easter the first day of passage instead of passing on my side I pass on the other side—looklook how beautiful it is said my brother I looked.] (p. 9)

What her brother judges “beau” [beautiful] is, from her point of view (“je regardai”), the site of a contradiction, one encapsulated in the French expression *avoir beau*, where an action is doubled by the action it excludes:

j’ai beau marcher au côté de mon frère, ça ne marche pas du même pas, le décollement commence, l’antique persécution inavouable, j’avance les pieds successivement, tandis qu’au fond ça crépite, le dédoublement avait commencé.

[in vain I walk beside my brother, it does not go in tandem, takeoff begins, the old inadmissible persecution, I move my feet forward in succession, while far away there’s a crackling, the doubling had begun.] (p. 20)

This opening scene, where she explores how she finds herself doing not so much what her brother wanted as the opposite of what *she* wanted (“je fais exactement

ce que *je ne voulais pas faire* et non ce que voulait mon frère” [I do exactly what *I did not want to do* and not what my brother wanted] (p. 11)), is in turn doubled later in the text by another one. She has no sooner left Gregor in order to continue to Buffalo on her tour of the different university libraries whose archives she had travelled to the US to consult, than she abruptly changes direction and returns to New York to see him again, on receipt of a letter from so him, a letter whose audacious, naked, crude [*cru*e] sentence “Je suis nu sur ma chaise longue” [I am naked on my chaise longue] (p. 125) so powerfully impresses her that she (mis)takes it for a letter from literature itself. She explains her about-face not in terms of a change in, or a realisation of, what she “really” wanted but rather as the outcome of another doubling: “Autrefois j’aimais beaucoup *le destin*, ce mot. Nous avons beau croire faire croire vouloir croire croire nous sommes doublés. Maintenant je sais que *le destin* est le nom d’une combinaison aléatoire de puissances-autres” [Previously I liked the word *destiny* a lot. It’s in vain we believe make believe want to believe believe we are doubled. Now I know that *destiny* is the name of a random combination of other-powers] (*Manhattan*, p. 121). What she once believed to be a stroke of fate, a pre-ordained course of events that will necessarily happen, she now sees as a chance concatenation, that is, as she goes on to develop, a concatenation of both predetermined and random combinations of events. Under the first category she notes the following:

1) la lettre G ; l’association entre les noms—éléments tendrement aimés des Georges et le nom non-reconnu de Gregor ; l’impossibilité où j’étais encore en 1964 de dire les mots *j’ai* et tous les autres mots-anges en *j’ai*, gé, jet, gel etc., j’essayais toujours instinctivement d’éviter tout contact gênant avec G mais elle est partout déguisée dans la langue française ; 2) la maladie précoce et la mort précipitée de préférence pulmonaire ou par étouffement, asphyxie, suffocations.

[1] the letter G; the association between the names—tenderly beloved elements of the Georges and the non-recognized name of Gregor; the impossibility still affecting me in 1964 of saying any words like *Gee* that sounded like the letter, instinctively I always tried to avoid any gibbering contact with G but it’s disguised everywhere throughout the French language; 2) premature illness and untimely death especially pulmonary or from smothering, asphyxia, suffocation.] (*Manhattan*, p. 121)

The fact that Gregor repeated certain signature elements that had determined her history—the decisive part that the letter G had played in her past, and the illness to which her father and son had succumbed—in itself was not sufficient to determine her future. It was the combination of that signature element with something that was not invested with any personal significance for her, “un élément extérieur d’une puissance unique et totalement accidentelle” [an outside element uniquely powerful and totally accidental] (*Manhattan*, p. 122), that affected her (and her behaviour) profoundly, catalysed her into doing something other than what she wanted/had decided to do. For her story to turn out the way it had, a conjuncture

was needed between the letters that were already loaded with meaning for her—notably G—and other, unrelated, utterly arbitrary letters:

La Lettre venue en vérité des confins ignorés par moi de la Littérature, chargée de toutes ses puissances séculaires et souterraines. Lettre de juif-se-disant-juif chargée des puissances millénaires d'un monde avec lequel j'étais en rapport de bannissance. Lettre qui était l'incandescence même de la Littérature, son scandale, sa quintessence, sa quinte déchirante, La Lave, le moment où le torrent hésite encore s'il deviendra racine d'oeuvre ou simple nuit d'agitation fébrile.

[*The Letter* arriving in truth from the unknown-to-me borders of Literature, invested with all its age-old subterranean powers. A Letter from a Jew-claiming-to-be-a-Jew invested with the millenary powers of a world to which my relation was one of banishing. A Letter that was the very incandescence of Literature, its scandal, its epitome, its heartbreaking effusion, Lava, the moment the torrent still hesitates if it will become the root of an oeuvre or simply a night of febrile agitation.] (*Manhattan*, p. 122)

La Lettre, Littérature, La Lave: the fact that in the original French all the capitalized letters in this quotation are Ls is a cogent visual reminder that the overdetermination of G is only part of the literary picture. The visibility of any one chain of signification at any one textual moment masks all the others that can variously emerge into the spotlight from a different point of view.

It is impossible to determine if the turning point specified at the end of this quotation (which itself brings the chapter including it to an end), the moment of hesitation before one can know for certain if the flow of letters will become a “racine d'oeuvre” or disappear with no literary follow-through, in this instance relates to Gregor (as author of the letter that moved the narrator to travel to New York) or—or as well as—to the narrator herself. In contrast, it is clear that receiving this letter “come from the borders of Literature” was a decisive turning point in transforming the narrator into the writer she would become. Yet the rhetorical flourish of ending the chapter on the first explicit evocation of the watershed moment that *Manhattan* as a whole explores should not blind us to the fact that the text states very clearly that this letter sent from literature itself is only part of the explanation. As mentioned above, the “random combination of other-powers” that the narrator sees as responsible for her destiny is a combination of combinations, “*la combinaison de cette combinaison* d'éléments internes [...] avec un élément extérieur d'une puissance unique et totalement accidentelle” [*the combination of this combination* of internal elements [...] with an external element uniquely powerful and totally accidental].

Gregor's destiny was different from hers. Gregor's destiny in fact remains undecidable to the extent that the reader is never able to ascertain if his “disparition” [disappearance] (*Manhattan*, p. 209) some months after the narrator's return to France involves his death from the pulmonary illness responsible for the scar on his chest or rather a literary disappearance, a renunciation of literature in favour of the

other string to his bow, mathematics, given that she learns of it from the atomic scientist in whose section he had been deemed “Best Young Maths Adviser” (p. 68). What appears beyond doubt, however, is that he did not become the writer he presented himself as already being. The penultimate chapter of the book explores the difference between the two aspiring writers, beginning with the narrator claiming that her love for literature had never led her to want to *be* the authors she so immensely admired: “*Je n’ai jamais voulu être Kafka, ni Stendhal, me dis-je et je fis une liste de tous ceux que j’aurais pu vouloir être par amour*” [*I never wanted to be Kafka, or Stendhal, I said to myself and I made a list of all those whom I could have wanted to be out of love*] (p. 211). She already felt herself so receptive to a host of others that she did not feel the need to “be” them: “*Moi comme autres cela me suffisait*” [*I was enough others for myself*] (p. 212). In contrast: “*Il aurait voulu être Kafka dis-je mais je ne savais même pas alors il y a plus de trente ans que certains voulaient être d’autres absolument; ou plutôt il voulait être Kafka, au lieu d’être un Kafka ce qu’il aurait pu être dis-je*” [*He would have liked to be Kafka I thought but I didn’t even know then more than thirty years ago that some people wanted to be others absolutely; or rather he wanted to be Kafka, instead of being a Kafka as he could have been I thought*] (p. 213). The difference is between wanting a partial overlap with one’s literary others and wanting an absolute one, a total replacement of his *moi* by another: “*Il voulait être Kafka et donc fuir Gregor, pensais-je, donc il ne voulait pas vraiment et absolument être Kafka, il voulait supprimer Gregor et être Kafka [...] il s’était totalement pris pour un autre*” [*He wanted to be Kafka and therefore to flee Gregor, I thought, so he did not truly and absolutely want to be Kafka, he wanted to eliminate Gregor and to be Kafka [...] he had totally taken himself for someone else*] (p. 215). Whereas she drew on the others she found overlapping with herself, he sought to appropriate an otherness that he located outside himself: “*n’étant peut-être personne à ses propres yeux il ne pouvait que vouloir un autre à la place de lui-même*” [*perhaps being nobody in his own eyes he could only want another in place of himself*] (p. 217). Cixous here suggests that the profound dislocation of one’s sense of identity that results from a traumatic loss, the fracturing of the self thus generated, may ironically result in a more secure sense of self; the narrator muses that perhaps the difference between them was that he had never known the kind of tragedy that she had experienced:

aucun ne lui était jamais arrivé encore de ces événements violents qui causent la naissance d’une âme vouée à l’alliance littéraire, aucune de ces circoncisions d’une partie du corps spirituel aucune de ces entailles en forme de bouches qui livrent passage aux premières imprécations de l’écriture il n’avait peut-être jamais encore perdu un père, ou l’ami plus cher que lui-même [...]. J’imagine qu’il avait le malheur de n’avoir pas été encore visité par un malheur.

[none of those violent events that cause the birth of a soul devoted to literary alliance had ever yet happened to him, none of those circumcisions of a part of the spiritual body none of those gashes shaped like mouths that

allow passage to the first curses of writing he had perhaps never yet lost a father, or a friend dearer to him than himself [...]. I imagine he had the misfortune never yet to have been visited by misfortune.] (*Manhattan*, pp. 217-218)

A profound loss proves a signature event, one that shapes the self in the very process of splintering it by making henceforward unassailable the simple certainty of being the contingent way one is. Those deeply marked by the unmistakable specifics of a traumatic experience are perhaps less likely to mistake themselves for another?

Insofar as Gregor's error, then, was "de n'avoir pas cru en lui-même" [not to have believed in himself] (p. 217), he could model himself entirely on Kafka, believe himself to be "exactly the same" as his chosen writer:

Il s'est cru, dis-je, je ne vois pas d'autre explication, il s'est cru le même exactement. L'idée de devenir le même de la manière la plus directe et la plus rapide a consisté dans les délais les plus courts à m'envoyer La Lettre crue: Voilà le piège: La Lettre. (p. 219)

[He believed himself, I don't see any other explanation, he believed himself to be exactly the same. The idea of becoming the same as directly and as rapidly as possible consisted in the immediate term of sending me the crude Letter: That is the trap: the Letter.] (p. 219)

He thought, in other words, that literature could be *entirely forged*. And the narrator goes on to realise that in taking him "à la lettre" [literally] (p. 221), in taking him for literature itself, in believing what he believed of himself, in confusing him with—or reducing him to—a letter, she too had committed a grave error: "Je l'aimais pour son génie contrefait il aurait aimé être aimé pour son autre génie le génie contrefacteur" [I loved him for his counterfeited genius he would have liked to be loved for his other genius his counterfeiting genius] (p. 231).⁶ The difference between them, in other words, is that Gregor's scar was *only* a fake one. Rather than inscribing a scar of his own in his writing, he sought to paint—forge—that of another: "Je soupire sur le sort du misérable peintre de cicatrice" [I sigh over the fate of the unhappy painter of scars] (p. 220).

As noted earlier, however, there is no reliable or surefire way of discriminating between the "fake" scar and the "true" one, of separating the literary traces that originate in one's personal history from those generated by the totally miraculous potential of literature itself, its extraordinary "puissance-autre." This is why the eye-patch offers a better figure of Cixous's writing—of literature in general—than the scar with which it in part overlaps. Like the scar, the patch alerts us to the presence of a wound although it does so even more indirectly, in a manner that strongly emphasises the impossibility of any access to it other than fictional: it hides the wound that it reveals. But the eye-patch has a further advantage over the scar as a figure of writing in that it emblematises *how* one sees (or does not see) as

well as *what* one sees (or does not see). At the same time that it hides the wearer's eye, it blocks out the world for the wearer. But also, just as the contact lens meant to enhance vision can do the opposite (as in the incident of the speck of dust that irritates the narrator's eye), so the eye-patch that obscures the world helps to elucidate it, by foregrounding that any vision is always partial. The patch magnificently visibilises the limits of any point of view, the fact that one of two eyes is covered ironically drawing attention to the inevitability of what in the book's final pages the narrator calls the "double point of view":

Dire ici qu'il existe un trouble dit « du double-point-de-vue » : on peut ne pas voir ce que l'on voit car on ne voit que ce que l'on croit voir ; on ne peut pas voir ce que l'on voit car on ne peut voir que ce que l'on veut voir ; on croit voir ce que l'on ne voit pas car on ne voit que ce que l'on croit.

[Say here that there is a so-called disorder of "the double point of view": one can not see what one sees because one only sees what one believes one sees; one cannot see what one sees because one can only see what one wants to see; one believes one sees what one does not see because one only sees what one believes.] (pp. 232-3)

At issue is not a failure of vision—a total inability to see—so much as an intrinsic partialness of vision: what we see is always skewed by what we want to see. That is, seeing is only ever part seeing. In particular, *Manhattan* develops the insight that the seeing involved specifically in literature—in combining letters together—combines both seeing and not seeing: it involves in part shining a spotlight on the singularities of one's own specific history, in part a random, unprogrammable, unsubstantiated shot in the dark.

Literature, then, is a space where everything is doubled. A seeing eye is doubled by a non-seeing one; allegory is overlain by metaphor; truth is intimately bound up with falsehood. One might believe that one can tell them apart, just as the narrator is confident that the chain of signification formed by the letter G and "les mots *j'ai* et tous les autres mots-anges en *j'ai*, gé, jet, gel etc." bears traces of the determining events of her prehistory in a way that other combinations of letters do not. One message of *Manhattan* is certainly that belief can never be verified. But another is that belief nonetheless plays an irreducible part in the literary experience. As the narrator's mother asserts, "On ne peut pas lire sans croire : tu lis tu crois" [One cannot read without believing: to read is to believe] (p. 20). Cixous's narrator may not be able to determine with any certainty which elements of her writing are rooted in her past. But her book admirably explores how combinations of letters need to

comprise part history, part story, for them to constitute what she considers literature worthy of the name.

Notes

1. Hélène Cixous, *Manhattan: Lettres de la préhistoire* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), p. 189. Henceforward abbreviated to *Manhattan*.
2. “*Cru*” is one of the words Cixous plays most untranslatably with in *Manhattan*, exploiting the homophony in French between the past participle of the verb *croire*, to believe, and the adjective meaning crude/raw.
3. Jacques Derrida, *Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie: Les secrets de l’archive* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), p. 43.
4. “The main point is surely that in discussing literature generally we must be ready to discern in almost any work at least a small degree of allegory. All literature, as Northrop Frye has observed, is from the point of view of commentary more or less allegorical, while no ‘pure allegory’ will ever be found”, Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), p. 8.
5. Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987); for Cixous, see pp. 165-70.
6. The question of forging inevitably evokes Stephen Dedalus’s line at the end of Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that he will go to “forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated consciousness of [his] race.” For a discussion of the Joycean intertext in the book, see Eric Prenowitz, “Make believe: *Manhattan’s* Folittérature”, *New Literary History*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2006, pp. 147-67.