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ÉCRITURE FÉMININE: SPIEL ON WORDS...

(Reading 'Portrait of Dora')

Spiel /ʃpi:l,spi:l/ (noun)—an elaborate or glib speech or story, typically one used by a salesperson.

(verb)—recite.

Spiel [ʃpi:l] (neuter noun)—fig. Das ist ein Spiel mit dem Feuer;

informal. *Etw aufs Spiel setzen*;

lit/fig. *das Leben ist kein Spiel*;

ein Spiel des Schicksals or Zufalls¹

There is something sublime lingering in the phrase *écriture féminine*; its very unknowability tantalises a promise of something already apparent and something else to come. Through words which struggle to mirror an already existent desire, the analysand wills for the emergence of feminine *jouissance*; the analyst listens for it. Here the analysand's desire goes beyond putting words together sequentially. Hélène Cixous seizes upon this not so much via the Lacanian delineation of empty and full speech but rather by postulating a feminine subject whose speech for woman is a commuting between unconscious desire and the body bearing the inscription of the will towards *jouissance*. In addition, she proposes that this commuting back and forth is what designates feminine *jouissance* as neither a passive experience nor a will towards phallic negation, but rather as an oscillation fraught with the uncertainty of subjective and political contention. We can think of this as not only a semiotic moment infused with sexuality but also one from which (woman-by-woman/woman-by-woman) a new language exceeding the capture of the signifier might emerge. What can we say about Cixous's curiously urgent claim of utopian *jouissance* being uniquely feminine and tied to body-politics? Rather than take up critique of her ontological position in *écriture féminine* for its essentialism and perhaps unattainable idealism, we might more profitably offer a different position. Cutting to the crux of the Lacanian question concerning feminine *jouissance* we are compelled to ask via Cixous's ontology of *écriture féminine*, exactly which fantasies (impulses towards *jouissance*) of political subjectivities that refuse to neatly appropriate the world, are worth preserving?

In response to this we must first take a step back by considering how fantasies are always libidinally based in the psyche, as Juliet Mitchell points out:

The psychoanalytic concept of sexuality confronts head-on all popular conceptions. It can never be equated with genitality nor is it the simple expression of a biological drive. It is always psycho-sexuality, a system of conscious and unconscious human fantasies involving a range of excitations and activities that produce pleasure beyond the satisfaction of any basic physiological need. (p. 2)

Dora's fantasies fascinated Cixous; she was not afraid to be identified with them and lamented Freud's failure to understand Dora as a woman. In *Sorties (The Newly Born Woman)* Cixous unapologetically says, "I am what Dora would have been if women's history had begun" (*Newly Born*, p. 99). For psychoanalytic theorists Dora is ripe with feminist imaginaries—how her one slap is not aimed merely against the annoying Herr K but against the patriarchy he represents. For those in psychoanalytic praxis a different, almost urgent desire emanates: how can we cure Dora?² How can woman exist without riding on the coat tails of the patriarchy? How is it that woman must admit to at times having done so? Why must woman pay with her being? Moreover and in light of these meta-psychoanalytic questions, how might we assess Freud's 'cure' of Dora? Cixous valiantly took up all these questions when she wrote *Portrait de Dora* in 1975 and in doing so allows for the possibility of politics to orient part of the psychoanalytic cure.

It is well worth noting Jacques-Alain Miller's account of 'true woman' as necessarily distinctive from man and as one which is psychically formed:

A true woman is the subject when it has nothing—nothing to lose. A true woman, according to Lacan, doesn't retreat from anything, before any sacrifice, when what is most precious is at stake. She doesn't retreat from anything. Whereas the man, obsessed, tangled up by what he has to lose, unable to advance, diverts the gaze, moves on to something else. That's what makes Freud say women don't have a superego. (p. 2)

'True woman' or ~~woman~~ marks impossibilities; it is the category in which the subject recognises that the enigmatic original lost object resides in the subject themselves. Such an enigma of woman starts with the Mother and her desire. We have probably all experienced challenges, even difficulties in the relationship with our Mother and these leave a trace. Freud took a long time to fully recognise this in Dora's neurotic question: *what does it mean to be a woman?* In his papers between 1925 and 1933 Freud developed his theory of the maternal relationship in terms of a confrontation with castration, wherein the maternal is a figure from which the young subject needs to separate yet remain connected to. We could say that the lifelong transference shared with one's mother is like an elastic band. However many years earlier in 1905, in Freud's most poignant case-study of feminine *jouissance*, that of Dora, he had neglected this all-important maternal figure. Dora failed to identify with her Mother and thus saw her as a stand-in figure for imperialist

modesty. The lack of attention to the absence of Dora's Mother by Freud (and subsequently, Cixous) is intriguing especially since psychoanalysis gives such primacy both to the figure of the mother and to her role in feminine *jouissance*.

As the story goes in the famous 'Lake Scene', Dora had grown weary of Herr K's ongoing, clumsy attempts to seduce her during which neither her father nor Freud were of much support in spite of her short but arguably successful analysis. In a last-ditch effort to convince Dora to be his lover, Herr K dropped his bombshell: that his wife Frau K meant nothing to him. This declaration memorably signified his extraordinary stupidity in failing to understand Dora had never wanted him because she was in love with Frau K, the very woman he was declaring to be his nothing. No wonder Dora's parting gesture to Herr K was a sharp slap—her ultimate speech act which although not delivered from the couch had nevertheless been fully formed there.

Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (to be subsequently referred to as "Dora") was written in 1901 but only published four years later in 1905. Freud's aim was to confirm his psychosexual theory of hysteria as well as to show the clinical value of the interpretation of dreams. Since Dora cut off treatment prematurely, the treatment was considered a failure. Haunted by Dora's rejection both of him and of the viability of his cure, Freud made use of this failure to recognize and elevate the importance of the interpretation of transference.

From Cixous's literary and theatrical handling of Dora something a little different might be gleaned. Instead of Dora landing on Freud's couch with her narrative intact but unable to be spoken (she coughs it out), Cixous wills the body of Dora to speak,

DORA

The unsaid, lost, in the body, in between the bodies.

No need to open it. It's always opened. I can open. Don't.

[..]

I still feel it there. I can't breathe. Pushing with all his strength.

It was a new sensation.

[She acts this out on a side stage

DORA (voice sometimes clear, sometimes drowsy.)]

Cixous then allows the feminine to speak for the man,

FRAU K

He's a man of base desires; he doesn't know what a real woman is. Men are often like this: they think only of their own satisfaction.

On the face of it, Frau K's counter intuitive moment seems absurdly obvious, especially if her contention is to allow feminine *jouissance* to be expressed not as some pseudo-utopic illusion (arguably, a comic-cynical position). Something else is taking place here which accords with Cixous's project of *écriture féminine*. Although fully aware of the impossibility of the project, Cixous absolutely rejects the notion that, psychoanalytically speaking it is futile, because it nevertheless speaks artistically to an absolute gap (once occupied by Dora's Mother who vanished into a patriarchal commodity) which is both deliberated and deferred. Frau K's marking of 'the' man by woman may appear an irreverent undertaking but it nevertheless both locates woman and distances her from the task of inscription, an enigma which Cixous recognises:

So, in the end woman, in man's desire, stands in the place of not knowing, the place of mystery. In this sense she is no good, but at the same time she is good because it's the mystery that leads man to keep overcoming, dominating, subduing, putting his manhood to the test, against the mystery he has to keep forcing back. (*Laugh*, p. 170)

Lacan too recognises this when he says, "for to suppose that a woman herself assumes the role of fetish merely introduces the question of her different position with respect to desire and the object" (*Ecrits*, p. 617). In some ways Frau K makes light of it—she has the advantage of being both the object of desire for Dora's Father and at the same time, able as a woman to articulate this feeling of exile (from man) whether self-inflicted or otherwise. Cixous understands that such self-realisation is intrinsically linked to the gaze of desire as one which cannot be altogether consciously known. Dora's plea to Frau K is one of her desire, that when Frau K's eyes are shut she clearly sees Dora as an image of desire: one that is both interpellated and split off from castration. This is how Cixous's frames hysteric desire, in a (symbiotic maternal-love) scene oriented towards nothing specifically nameable:³

DORA

Look at me.

I would like to go into your eyes.

I would like you to close your eyes.

Lacan rightly reminds us that we can never see ourselves in the way in which we are seen. Hence Cixous's Dora depicts woman in a most tragic situation (as one who does not yet know herself) from which the only way out is via submission to *écriture féminine*: that what is written is symbolic and lingers in the shadows as a wish fulfilment. What is this enigmatic writing and why does Cixous persist in claiming its viability for reconstructing the author as uniquely feminine? As Cixous writes of Dora,

Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide....

Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible. (*Laugh*, p. 889)

It is the neurotic's desire to be seen as unique, that their subjectivity be born into and borne out of inscription and thereby lives this fictitious script, gesture by gesture.⁴ For Cixous, the neurotic organises their symptoms within the discourses of life which must include fictions of what constitutes pleasure. Deployment of the fiction of Otherness is to some extent distinctive in being overdetermined by critical symbolic forces such as culture, gender or politics, all of which promise to provide consistency. Barthes's infamous phrase, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes, p. 143) speaks to the extimate and fictitious spaces occupied and shared by author and reader—in other words, the same space—within and without each other. As a poetic example, it is often said by those who write haiku that it is never finished until it has been read. The function of this aesthetic command is paradoxical because whilst setting the scene for a relationship it at the same time ruptures it. Perhaps even ends it. Cixous's radical break attempts to personalise the impersonal by insisting on a certain enigmatic force, that feminine writing requires the writer be intrinsically feminine (as a writer). Such a focus on an interiority of the author enables the reader to witness a moment of performative subjectivity in which the aesthetic embracing of the potentiality of language transcends the ego. For Cixous, this radical interiority is a curious site in so far as the very idea of it existing inspires repetition of fictions as producing a theatrical (feminine) subject. Such repetition is Cixous's illuminous point: she knows that in the act of repeating we don't necessarily see the same thing again and again. Thus she rewrites Dora as a singular subject who portrays the end-game fantasy of hysteria as an act of self-authorisation by first registering a certain suppressive symbolic charge:

DORA

Everyone knows how to be accommodating.

We can say that *écriture féminine* is Cixous's effort to reclaim something lost in the phallic order, a way to speak about alienation, desire and distance as a particular authoring of the subject. In this way Cixous is chasing an impossible ideal—after all, as Lacanians well know, everything that can be uttered is already in the Phallic order as a production of language and moreover, a production of subjectivity as constructed through language. What then is Cixous's plea for theatrical fiction attempting to accomplish? In approaching this question it is first worth noting Lacan's position on *mi-dire*:

It's a defensible proposition to say that truth has the structure of fiction. This is what is normally called 'myth'. Many truths have a mythical existence, and it is precisely for this reason that truth cannot be exhausted, the whole truth cannot be said. This is what I stated in the following form: truth can only be half-said. One speaks the truth as best one can, that is, in part. (Lacan, "Columbia", p. 9)

Perhaps this is Cixous's reading of Dora, Lacan providing one half and she, the other:

I've opened the way to something I've called 'the saying of the truth' [...] The analysand—if the analysis is functioning, if it's moving forward—comes to speak in an increasingly focused way, focused on something that has always stood in opposition to the polis—in the sense of the city—. (Lacan, "Columbia", p. 10)

Whilst grounded in the symbolic for it to be realized, feminine *jouissance* is enigmatic, fictitious, and somewhat anxious in its pleas to work through the angst of ordinary desire. Freud puts this perfectly:

Mental work is linked to some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject's major wishes. From there it harks back to a memory of an earlier experience (usually an infantile one) in which this wish was fulfilled; and now it creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfilment of the wish. What it thus creates is a day-dream or phantasy, which carries about it traces of its origin from the occasion which provoked it and from the memory. Thus, past, present and future are strung together, as it were, on the thread of the wish that runs through them. (*Creative Writers*, p. 57)

However just as there is nothing natural about the category 'woman' and her wishes, so also with her *jouissance*, as Lacan hints at:

It could be said that *jouissance* is limited by natural processes. But actually, we have no idea whether they are natural processes. We simply know that we have ended up considering to be natural the mollycoddling that a society that more or less orderly maintains us in except that everyone is dying to know what would happen if things went really bad. (Lacan, *Sem XVII*, p. 261)

Certainly, *jouissance* is *there*, it is apparent, one experiences it but it exists beyond language, beyond the spoken, lingering at the edge of fantasy together with the exciting horror of it. Yet at the same time, as Freud points out, *any* wish fulfilment is simply very ordinary, even if presented as theatrical. *Jouissance* exists in the gaps not only of what is said but also in the struggle to say at the level of wish fulfilment. For Cixous and Lacan ~~woman~~ cannot be spoken and exists necessarily both *in* the void and *as* the void of man. Can the void be thus spoken?

FREUD

Do you like to write? Yes.

DORA

No.

For Cixous, the author holds transcendent potential which is ironic given the author's eventual impersonal status once a work has been read. Work becomes *the work* which has the function of being repeatedly read and judged—worked through.⁵ The idea that authorship is discerning of some sort of universality, a notion so important to Cixous, is more destabilizing than comforting, her designation *woman* being a complete escape from the singularity of the will towards uniqueness. Cixous's rewriting of Dora is a blueprint for the neurotic first to take up another image and then speak it plainly, this requiring willingness for submission to an ethic of self-erasure regarding authorship. Cixous sacrifices her own status as an author so that the fiction of Dora can live on. This is precisely what Dora's Mother does—she submits to domesticity over desire and thus fades into patriarchal oblivion. Moreover a further requirement of self-authorship (as Freud, Lacan and Cixous all agree) is acceptance that under the pressure of the unconscious, transcendence not only falters but completely collapses. Nevertheless, they all preserve the enigma and anxiety of the feminine, the not-all as 'remaining to be seen'...⁶

On the path that condescends to my desire, what the Other wants, what he wants even if he doesn't know in the slightest what he wants, is nevertheless, necessarily, my anxiety. It is not enough to say that woman overcomes hers through love. That remains to be seen. (*Sem. X*, p. 180)

After all, the big Other fails to manifest when most needed. Such a failure of wish-fulfilment produces a very ordinary fantasy, as when Freud likens the creative writer to a "day-dreamer in broad daylight" (*Creative Writers*, p. 58). There is nothing controversial about this subject position, which is precisely Cixous's point.

If we abstract the subject from what is spoken, we are then looking at the manifestation of symptoms. In other words, if we remove the will to take up uniqueness, we can then perceive some sort of destination for the speaker. For example, affirming that one should like to write does not necessarily mean that one takes up the *jouissance* of writing. What might Cixous then have to tell us about symptoms? We can find out by abstracting Cixous into the void along with Freud and Dora:

Do you like to write?

Yes. No.

We are presented with an ambiguous response to the unanswerable question/task (praxis) of writing:

Do you like to?

Write, yes.

No.

Moreover, we have *spiel* of words as an attempt to (re)write:

Do you like to?

(w)rite

Yes? No?

That Dora should desire to be the object is a rite of patriarchal passage that she rejects, “the unsaid, lost, in the body, in between the bodies” (*Dora*, p. 35). Perhaps Freud could have instead asked, “Do you like to (be) right?” In which case, Dora’s emphatic ‘no’ is the perfect cue for interrogating the oedipal mess she finds herself in. In his prefatory remarks to ‘Dora’, Freud is defensive, anticipating the ‘judgment of the world’. He explains that if his theory that “the causes of hysterical disorders are to be found in the intimacies of the patient’s psychosexual life”, then he has no choice but to approach the matter with disarming candidness “even with a young woman” (Freud, “Fragment”, pp. 7-8). As justification, Freud compares his role to that of the gynaecologist who knows that the body contains knowledge of one’s psychic suffering. This is arguably Freud’s first misstep which Lacan attempts to mediate by maintaining that there are indeed consequences to the “imaginary mold” in which Dora is caught (Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 221):

In order for her [Dora] to gain access to this recognition of her femininity, she would have to assume her own body, failing which she remains open to the functional fragmentation... that constitutes conversion symptoms.

Interestingly, according to Lacan this is where ‘The’ woman fails, where there is a failure of the appeal to femininity, and where in its place is an appeal (perhaps a regression) to identification with man. Dora’s relation to her body is organized around this “earliest imago” (*Ecrits*, p. 221) that of her brother Otto, through the experience of sucking her thumb whilst tugging at her brother’s ear. Experiencing her body as an ‘enjoying’ body (in Lacanian terms, where the imaginary register is knotted to the Real of *jouissance*) occurs not directly but via an identification with the brother’s body (another body borne out of her Mother). For Lacan this is fundamental because—in line with his mirror stage theory—it constitutes “that primordial identification through which the subject recognises herself as I” (*Ecrits*, p. 221).

It is important to note that Freud’s clinical picture of Dora is different to those of his other case histories. With Dora he offers no orientation as to technique, unlike for example in the case of the Rat Man. His structure of what constitutes a case is with Dora noticeably different, departing not only from his method but perhaps also from core psychoanalytic concepts, such as lamenting the central figure of the Mother. To this extent Freud’s technique with Dora is experimental as well as messy and perplexing. Freud emphasizes his role as investigator when he introduces two kinds of ‘disingenuousness’, the conscious and the unconscious. These together with amnesia, contends Freud, lead to doubt and falsification of memories. Freud specifically emphasises the importance of memory. Indeed, he states that the aim of the treatment is to “remove all possible symptoms and to replace them by conscious thoughts” and to “repair all damages to the patient’s memory” so that their story may be “intelligible, consistent, and unbroken” (Freud, “Fragment”, p. 11).

We could say that Cixous, too, offers technique, one which she stands by through rewriting Dora. Furthermore *écriture féminine* is the writing of the feminine, specifically a reauthoring of *woman*. Within the category of *woman* is contained not only Dora's urgent question—what it does to mean to be a woman?—but also the fictions necessary in sculpturing the space occupied by *woman*. Cixous etches her way into these fictions which stage Dora's symbolic and psychic life. She is a daughter without the enigma of her (M)other. Moreover, whether Dora likes writing or not becomes irrelevant because through Freud she is already written by the name-of-the-Father and Herr K. Dora has herself plenty more to say and Cixous makes sure of this through an ambiguous yet threatening *spiel* on words... (*Dora*, p. 9).

DORA (*une voix qui déchire un silence—ton entre la menace et la demande—s'écoute*)

Si vous osez m'embrasser, je vous donnerai une gifle!

DORA (*d'un coup proche de l'oreille*)

Osez m'embrasser, je vous donnerai une gifle!

[DORA (*her voice, threatening and demanding rips through the silence*)

If you dare to kiss me, I will slap you!

DORA (*with a slap close to the ear*)

Dare to kiss me, I will slap you!]

Which symptom is Cixous abstracting in her reauthoring of Dora? After all without Freud's initial miss-step Dora would not be Dora, furthermore this not only renders her question as one to be asked in the Symbolic but also situates it as ultimately unanswerable. Cixous grasps onto this moment of realisation, that *woman* exists because all subjects are divided and must, moreover live with each other's division.

Cixous's situating of the impossible feminine subject is exactly where she places Dora. If we ask the two most obvious questions inspired by Nietzsche about authorship: *who is speaking and why are they speaking?*, the destination of the subject-supposed-to-speak is not particularly clear. However what is striking is how Dora's situatedness constitutes an unbearable subjectivity which is also somewhat detached in being sutured to the fantasy of knowledge as an ethical drive. Through speaking, Dora is provided with a destination of sorts, albeit somewhat obscure and uncomfortable. The will to knowledge is a fantasy of enlightenment which necessarily fails when the subject takes up the duty to speak. For Cixous, the author's task is to demystify not language itself but the experience of it. That the subject does not represent language (otherwise this would be to fetishize it) nor defends or defies it (which would lead to subjugation), but rather elucidates or

manifests how the crux of subjectivity is complicit in the discrepancies language inevitably brings: this is what leads us to say one thing and mean another.

In these ways *écriture féminine* not only expounds an author-reader (non)relation but also a theory of language. Although it may appear hyperbolic, repositioning the author does similarly for the reader; furthermore rewriting as a situated subject is undertaking an activity of indeterminacy. What then disappears in Cixous's reading of Dora? She becomes a feminist anti-hero who is bound by the void of her indecision precisely where her subjective relocation is to be found.

In Freud's case history he gives Dora a fictitious name, a pseudonym. In doing the same Cixous confronts us with Freud's fantasy of tying dreams together with his theory of neurosis as emanating from the name-of-the-Father. This is especially so in Dora's dream about the bejewelled case, representing "a substitute for the shell of Venus, the female genitals" as a normal hysterical manifestation of repressed sexuality (Freud, "Fragment", pp. 113-14).⁷ Cixous's intervention gives us a glimpse of her fantasy in which psychoanalysis has an investment in the politics of feminism, in which she proceeds to write into her hysterical and redemptive play, *Portrait of Dora*. The lack of determiner in Cixous's title is noticeable. It is not *The Portrait of Dora* or *A Portrait of Dora* but rather *Portrait* stands alone, where Dora is both the image and the one who frames the gaze of her own subjectivity. Although her image doesn't say everything about her desire, this deliberate half speaking implied in the play's title identifies her as the subject who is struggling,⁸ her gaze directly invoking the split subject tarrying with contradiction,

DORA (to her Father)

You *do* understand me, but you are not honest.

DORA (then attempting to clarify her previous statement)

You *don't* understand. *I* am not honest.

Cixous plays around with the so-called category of honesty from the very beginning:

...comme une ombre, dans les rêves, ils deviennent souvent si distincts qu'on croit les saisir d'une façon palpable, mais, malgré cela, ils échappent à un éclaircissement définitif, et si l'on procède sans habileté ni prudence particulière, on ne peut arriver à décider si une pareille scène a réellement eu lieu... (Cixous, *Newly Born*, p. 9)

[...like a shadow, in dreams, they often become so vivid that we believe we grasp them in a palpable way, but despite this, they escape definitive clarification, and if we proceed without particular skill or prudence, we cannot decide whether such a scene really took place...]

For Cixous's Dora, to be honest and to be understanding are more than simply doing words. Rather for Cixous they are both positions into which Dora implicates

herself as a universal position contending with the contradiction inherent in split subjectivity. Yet at the same time, Dora refuses the universal feminine position which has been thrust upon her when she says “I am not honest”, which resituates her subjectivity as one thrust into a cluster of competing and incoherent feminine discourses. Feminist theorist, Nancy K. Miller, puts this well,

Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity, to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not, I think collectively felt burdened by too much self, ego, cogito, etc. Because the female subject has juridically been excluded from the polis, hence decentred, ‘disoriginated’, deinstitutionalised, etc., her relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority, displays structurally important differences from that universal position. (Miller, p. 106)

Cixous highlights the feminine as *par excellence* localized, a perfect space from which to write ironically. Cixous well knows that writers and readers are at one another’s mercy. Words can become tarnished, dishonest, acquire new meanings or grow old and die. Furthermore, cynically it might seem that there is no merit in being original, only appearing as such. Cixous is a modern writer and as a trail-blazer for feminist psychoanalysis is not intimidated by vulnerability, apparent impossibility or inevitable judgement. There is merit in the power of inspecting ourselves and this is exactly the scrutiny to which she puts Dora as a figure of the feminine. Here we can draw on those poets who are inspired by symbolism. Like Mallarmé, Cixous allows subjectivity to distil in its embodiment, even if it is an embodiment of the idea that one can be freed from the necessity of restraint. As a thinker and writer Cixous harbours an internal necessity to transform ideas into words. For her, as for Mallarmé, even silence or mumbling can be expressive units of linguistic structure. Like Dora, Cixous speaks with the urgency of instinctive desire, whether sensical or otherwise. The voice, after all, is a demand on the body. Although we may know the story of Dora, we have not heard it quite like Cixous tells it: a woman who lingers in contradiction. Here Mallarmé’s musings on the potentiality of the word come to mind:

With several words the line of verse constructs a completely new word, foreign to the language and a part, it seems, of an incantation; and thus it perfects the separation of the word: denying, in a sovereign gesture, any chance—any descriptive sense which has lingered in spite of the artful renewal both in meaning and sonority; and so you feel the surprise of never having heard any such fragment of speech, while, at the same time, your recollection of the object named bathes in a new atmosphere. (Mallarmé, p. 53)

The crux of neurosis is its uncanny moment enabling the subject to both capture and be captured by that which new yet all too familiar. Such a moment is one of crisis for the subject who, whilst knowing who they are not, asks ‘who am I’? The neurosis of Cixous’s Dora is no exception. Yet it is also (following Freud) a form of

day-dreaming. There is a scene in which Dora literally wanders around her own question, *what does it mean to be woman?*

DORA

Who is abandoning me? Who was it?

Who is betraying whom in this affair?

Who is in whose place?

Dora's complicity in her father's affair with Frau K taunts her as she struggles to ask the right question, when she already half knows the answer. Her repetition of 'who' so dominates her question that it might just as well be invisible in so far as it revolves around the subjects she is stuck with and who make up her lived experiences. Here the word 'Who' being neither possessed nor possessing, speaks to the impossibility of Dora's reckoning with herself as *Spiel*, Freud's pleasure play or imaginative writing which allow for the representation of partial fantasy. Freud wrote about the process of creative writing as one in which *Spiel* and writing are contrasting ways in which to envisage realities (*Spiel*, play, being carried out by *Schauspieler*, players).

Cixous's play portrays how Dora is implicated in the imaginative worlds of other players: notably, her Father, Herr K and Freud. Freud's insistence on unintended proverbial humour,

FREUD

Where there's smoke, there's fire...

is intended by Cixous more as common sense logic than keen psychoanalytic insight. Here Freud is pitched as the tongue-in-cheek, text-book, old fashioned name-of-the-Father, the one closest to God and dating back to before the French Revolution! Freud had insisted that we should never stop playing (around) with words because then pleasure truly stops. So the proverbs come thick and fast ... especially when Dora is laying on the couch, opening and closing her purse,

FREUD

When the lips are silent, fingertips chatter...

Although the absence of her Mother strikes at the heart of Dora's generic 'Who', she is represented by a lost object designed to be opened and closed. While the activity of opening and closing serves as a metonymy in motion for both Cixous's Dora and Dora's Mother, it is also tasked as potentially tantalizing violence,

DORA (recalling a dream)

There is a door in Vienna

[...]

He grasped me, he held me against the door

[...]

There is someone behind the door

But is it him behind the door?

You never know...

[...]

FRAU K (to Dora)

Don't close yourself!

And here Freud provides the logic,

FREUD

Naturally it cannot be a matter of indifference whether a girl is 'opened' or 'closed'

The inherent horror Dora feels is revealed in one of her dreams,

DORA

I have no doubt that he intends to force open the door...

How simple everything is.

It is either Him or Me.

That's the law.

FREUD

We all know what key opens the door in this case.

To appreciate the very utterance which horrifies Dora, that Herr K's wife means nothing to him, implying that woman is necessarily representative as nothing to man,⁹ let us trace the thread of Dora's wish. Or rather it this Cixous's wish for Dora?

In *Portrait of Dora*, Cixous plays with the voice, ensuring that Dora gets the last word but not before she is almost recast as a subject who necessarily shifts in subject position—the task of psychoanalysis—and instead reimagined as one who takes up the passage of the act. Cixous's *Spiel* about Dora gives us more than just a reiteration of her question regarding what it means to be a woman in that it also provides insight into how *Spiel* mobilises the signifier towards self-authorisation. Here Cixous agrees with Lacan: Dora's analysis lasts as long as necessary but not a moment longer. Freud is honest about his miss-step regarding Dora's desire, he never was subject-supposed-to-know about it. And Dora is honest about her desire that transmission of it should not to be hijacked by the Masters discourse. So although she flees the scene pretty quickly she does not flee psychoanalysis. That

is, she subverts one discourse (the name-of-the-Father's law) for another (the Analyst's discourse). She is practicing self-authorisation in the most radical way possible whilst also playing around with the experience of transference. She further reveals to Freud that his desire as a psychoanalyst is not pure, thereby requiring him to take up the ethical dimension of seriously, radically listening so that fantasy can fall and *jouissance* be managed. Here Freud needs a dose of know-how rather than knowledge. Moreover he has no choice but to tolerate Dora making a demand which he does not understand, rather than reducing her to the status of another little other. This is the courage of psychoanalysis, as Leguil points out:

In psychoanalysis, it is a question of 'recognising in desire the subject's truth'. In this sense, there is a price to pay in order to gain access to this truth of desire. It supposes a decision of the subject, that of not yielding on this desire which, nevertheless, he does not manage to circumscribe clearly. Access to the truth of desire supposes a certain courage, because there where it is a question of desire, it is also a question of sacrifice. A share of drive *jouissance* is thus to be sacrificed for access to the truth of desire, a truth that is not given but torn off when the subject grants an unconditional value to desire. It only happens if the subject consents to detach himself from a certain relation to goods and to *jouissance*. This operation supposes a separation, a yielding, an extraction of what Lacan called, taking up Shakespeare, 'the pound of flesh'. (Leguil, n.p.)

What Freud ends up realizing is that psychoanalysis is a place where people go to work on the singularity of their desire. Together the analyst and analysand undertake apparently impossible, sometimes intolerable but always courageous work and they assume that the flow of transmission can be counted on. This is absolutely not the case with the Masters discourse which has no idea what to do with analytic transference in which there is an inability or unwillingness to pay with one's very being.¹⁰ For the Master there is investment in civility but not so with psychoanalysis, which is a site of necessary resistance and perhaps even revolt, so that in the uptake of true speech there is a change in subject position. If the Master stands in for civility then psychoanalysis stands in for discontent. Cixous implies this when scrutinizing the conditions of patriarchy; for her, psychoanalysis can undermine and reterritorialize the stability of patriarchy as a political condition. To put any condition under proper scrutiny one needs to sacrifice recognition from the big Other and be willing to take up a different desire. Cixous's portrait of the hysteric who is Dora undertakes the psychoanalytic task precisely an act of *écriture féminine*: it drains whatever unconscious forces are bothering Dora into linguistic representations in the Symbolic. But that is all it does and nothing more. It does not allow any shift in subject position either for the reader or for the Hysteric. One has to be on the couch for such proper transformation to take place.¹¹

However Cixous does treat the Hysteric with the greatest humility, by listening to Dora in the way perhaps she should have been radically listened to by Freud. This is not listening by flattery but rather a way into serious listening to the truth of

desire. In this way, Dora galvanises Freud's theory and mission of analysis as being both terminable and interminable. It never finishes and is always beginning. It never promises (much to the Hysteric's chagrin) 'a discourse of freedom' either from the symptom or absolute knowledge, as Lacan contends in *Seminar III*. Cixous writes that women are given the choice of castration or decapitation (1981) here we can say that either way they get to keep at least one thing and in so doing enable focus on the more urgent question of what constitutes woman traversing social, symbolic and cultural oppositions. Lacking lack has a certain freedom—one doesn't necessarily have to miss lack (of lack) in order to recognise its absence. Here Cixous maintains that we must take such traversal of oppositions at its word—everything depends on language, particularly the seizing of desire as a fiction of 'being'. Freud however, by failing even to register what a woman wants left the door open on feminine desire as a political question which demands something of the body.

What then does Cixous do? She plays with the voice of sexual difference, Dora's in particular, as one which can tame ambitious fantasies and from which one can speak in order to act in a singular, even heroic way. The task of reauthoring through the politics of Dora is one which Cixous takes up as a question of how psychoanalysis, via the complex of hysteria, is a form of political resistance. Because of its compulsive determination often unchecked prior to analysis, Hysteria is the perfect condition into which different ideations can manifest. As we know from Freud's analysis of Dora and as Cixous repeatedly points out, the Hysterical complex rests upon contradictions and irreconcilable insistences which manifest as anxiety, grief and psychic pain. These are not ideas as such but sensations which precondition the setting of an idea. Hence the transformational quality of Hysteria: Dora unconsciously wrote out her Mother in an effort to carve a space for herself. However, Cixous doesn't indulge the seemingly interminable injunction of complexes for their own sake. Rather she asks what *do* complexes stand in the name of and what *should* they stand in the name of. For her, the Hysterical complex is a political platform on which to express resistance to patriarchal structures and to refuse such structures as naturalized given tendencies. She (re)creates Dora as a political figure, one who eventually goes her own way, beyond the bounds of censorship and masculine command, one who is a feminine textual body, "always endless, without ending: there is no closure, it doesn't stop..." (Cixous, "Castration", p. 174).¹² Cixous was astutely aware that interpretation needs to be kept at bay because it feeds the symptom and prevents the pleasure of the voice being signified as a political fact. Here Cixous upends essentialism and its pointless promises: women authors don't have to write as men and women protagonists don't have to desire as men. Furthermore, when it comes to written identities, women should not be written off in the writing world as justification for textual anonymity or exclusion. The task of *écriture féminine* should be cautious around suturing. Rather women should speak of what writing will do ("Castration", p. 875). Perhaps it is at this juncture we could change the subject and ask Cixous, what happened to Dora's Mother as

also a player of *féminine* contradiction—~~woman~~/woman, one who is split off—as a remainder also worth preserving?

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the editors, Sigi Jöttkandt and Jean-Michel Rabaté for their close reading of an earlier draft of this text.

Notes

1. Translation: *This is playing with fire;*

informal. to put sth [something] at risk;

lit/fig. the life is not a game;

a game of fate or chance.

2. To take this question a bit further, how can we cure Dora's indifference to her Mother's obedience to the patriarchal conditions of bourgeois Vienna?

3. As Lacan says, "Desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for nothing nameable. And at the same time this desire lies at the origin of every variety of animation." (Lacan, *Sem. II*, p. 223).

4. Strangely and provocatively, it is the anti-psychoanalytic thinker Foucault (1977) who picks up on this when reflecting that the poet, Mallarmé was constantly rewriting (out-writing) himself, to bring himself to reason. Mallarmé pursued language's potentially unifying nature as also fragmented. In *The Order of Things* (1966 [1994]) Foucault offers that in response to Nietzsche's question, 'who is speaking?' Mallarmé attempts, especially in *ecce homo* a de-authoring out of the discourse of literature—the word itself is too precarious, fragile and enigmatic to fully capture the author (and thus the reader). The best outcome for the field of literature lies in capturing the author's intentions within coexisting and competing discourses. We can think similarly about the category 'woman', an enigma unfolding upon itself and which appears obedient to symbolic discourses. However as Cixous reminds us, something remains and cannot be muted in the process of (re/de)authoring. The political category of woman-author is always repeating, never fully formed and establishes a consistency between the Imaginary (the body) and the Symbolic (the gaze) from which *jouissance* can spring.

5. Such is the direct hysterical charge by Cixous to Freud:

DORA:

Qu'est-ce que vous voulez me faire dire? (*Dora*, pp. 57-58)

[What do you want me to say?]

6. It is worth considering the ambiguity of this phrase as it concerns Dora's situatedness as divided subjects. Dora exists as a remainder of her Mother; a mother who is not seen by Dora. Yet at the same time, Dora occupies a space (remains) where she desires to be seen by Frau K.

7. It is worth noting that the bejewelled case Dora dreamt about actually belonged to her Mother.
8. We could say that Cixous is fantasizing what Dora might have said had she instead of Freud been her analyst. Moreover, Cixous is imagining how she would listen to Dora, the very function and desire of psychoanalysis as Lacan points out: "What defines an analyst? I have said it. I have always said right from the start. An analysis is what one expects from an analyst. But this 'what one expects from an analyst'—we would obviously have to try to understand what it means. What one expects from a psychoanalyst is to get his knowledge to function in terms of truth. This is why he limits himself to a half-saying. This has consequences." (*Sem. XVII*, p. 53).
9. Here a most interesting inversion occurs since Dora's Mother has also no status of woman for her.
10. The Analyst's Discourse by contract must pay with their being. It is notable that Dora did exactly what she was unconsciously meant to do at the end of analysis: she tossed the analyst away like trash (much like she did to her Mother who was so symbolized that she ended up vanishing). That the analyst is refused in such a way is a manoeuvre Lacan speaks about in his "Italian Note" when he articulates that the end of analysis is marked by a certain horror *par excellence* as the horror of knowledge. (Lacan, "Note").
11. It is worth quoting Freud here: "Firstly, we do not understand why transference is so much more intense with subjects in analysis than it is with other such people who are not being analysed; and secondly, it remains a puzzle why in analysis transference emerges as the most powerful resistance to the treatment, whereas outside analysis it must be regarded as the vehicle of cure and the condition of success. For our experience has shown us—and the fact can be confirmed as often as we please—that if a patient's associations fail the stoppage can invariably be removed by an assurance that he is being dominated at the moment by an association which is concerned with the doctor himself or with something connected with him. Thus transference to the doctor is suitable for resistance to the treatment only in so far as it is a negative transference or a positive transference of repressed erotic impulses." (Freud, "Dynamics", p. 314).
12. It is worth noting that there has been quite a bit of pushback to Cixous's position. In particular I refer to Sarah French who maintains that Cixous's rereading of Dora is far from political and subversive, and moreover hysteria cannot be justified as a political position let alone a utopic feminine one (French).

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