

# Everything-Is-Well-Said Living Beside Me in the Process of Continuing: Jacques Derrida as Writing-Writer Reader of Hélène Cixous

Eric Prenowitz

University of Leeds

E-mail: E.Prenowitz@leeds.ac.uk

DOI: 10.51865/JLSL.2024.14

## Abstract

In the search for a comparative measure of the importance Derrida grants to the various authors he reads, one could do worse than to tally the number of words he coins or reinvents in their honour. Surely Cixous would come out on top. And beyond wordcounts, her work inspires/requires him to produce particularly subtle, complex and inventive writing. It is also true, and these two things are beguilingly difficult to disentangle, that Derrida's reading relation to Cixous's work is unique: not only is he her first reader, in multiple ways, but he is at once inside and outside, deconstructing the borders between the public and the private, the published and the unpublished, the fictive and the biographical, the work and the life. This essay attempts to open new perspectives on these paradoxical relations, for example by reassessing the question of 'sides' as developed by Derrida: no longer Cixous/Derrida as life/death, but rather side-by-side in, through or for life.

**Keywords:** *Derrida, Cixous, genius, puisse, côté, petigre, écrivain*

At the beginning of *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius*, Jacques Derrida asks a series of questions about 'genius'. The first is recognizably philosophical, mobilizing what we might call the ontological principle, 'it is', *c'est*, or 'what is': 'A genius, what's that?'<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, by the traditional standards of philosophical writing, this is a somewhat colloquial formulation,<sup>2</sup> frontloading the object to produce a kind of syncopation, which is accentuated by the repetitive rhythmical self-referential pronoun-verb stutter of '*qu'est-ce que c'est*'.<sup>3</sup> Then, second question, on the second line: '*Quoi du*

<sup>1</sup> '*Un génie, qu'est-ce que c'est?*', Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 1 [*Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 9]; hereafter *G*, with the French page references in square brackets when the translation has been modified.

<sup>2</sup> Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?*, for example, is not translated into French as '*Les Lumières, qu'est-ce que c'est?*', but '*Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?*' This more 'philosophical' form of the question in French is reiterated by Foucault with his own '*Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?*', not to mention his '*Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?*' The same goes, mutatis mutandis, for the French translation of Heidegger's *Was ist Metaphysik?* And '*Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*' by Deleuze and Guattari isn't '*La philosophie, qu'est-ce que c'est?*'

<sup>3</sup> It is worth adding that, as we'll see later, in his earlier book, *H. C. for Life*, Derrida in effect cosigns Cixous's 'C', which he associates homonymically with the ontological affirmation *c'est*, 'it is', and the *essai*, the essay, but also the *Jardin d'Essais* in Algiers that they both frequented as children. And he asserts that, not unlike himself, she is preoccupied with *c'est*, the response to the question '*qu'est-ce que c'est?*'

*génie*?' 'What of genius?' 'What's up with genius?' or 'What's to say about genius?', an even more informal question that neglects the verb *to be* altogether (G, 1 [9]). We quickly get the impression of a philosopher going slightly rogue, adapting the form of what might otherwise be a standard philosophical interrogation to the demands of a particularly difficult-to-capture 'object' of study.

Derrida goes on to 'convert' the word *genius* several times, 'three or four times at least' (G, 2). He even addresses (the) genius in the second person, 'for reasons I shall not immediately divulge', he says, apostrophizing it and asking it who it is: 'Genius, who are you?' (G, 2) as if it were an unknown yet somehow familiar stranger. It's perhaps not the first thing one notices, but this expression, *qui es tu?*, pivots around the word *tu*, which is both the familiar second person singular pronoun and the past participle of the verb *taire*, 'to silence', such that *génie qui es(t) tu* also means, if we allow for a spectral *t*, 'genius who is silenced'.<sup>4</sup> This silenced *tu*, and the homonymy itself, one meaning always in reserve behind the other, inaugurates another of the book's themes: that of a certain silence of literature, a never fully disclosable textual secret that always hides from the first glance or syllable.

Derrida doesn't let on at first, but given that the text was originally delivered at a colloquium in 2003 marking the gift by Hélène Cixous of her archives to the French National Library (BnF), it's at best an open secret that these conversions serve to turn the word 'genius' towards Cixous. The writing here has a kind of playful audacity, and while this is hardly out of character for Derrida, it seems to be searching, inventing, adjusting its register as if to meet Cixous half way. Of course, it is a deconstructive commonplace that there can be no reading that's not itself, in turn, a writing. And yet one senses that something particularly significant is at stake in this case. Derrida's insistence on his privileged position with regard the life and/or work of Hélène Cixous is already unmistakable: she may be a genius, but it's he who will have transformed this word in her honour. This is at once a modest and a bold claim: 'The future of this word', he writes, will be 'stranger than the singular fate of its past' (G, 5). By rewriting this word, by signing it, we might even say, in Cixous's hand, Derrida has given it a new future. In what follows, I will explore some of the complexities of Jacques Derrida's reading-writing relation to Hélène Cixous.

### ***En Savoir Long: Dreamwords***

To begin with, I'll turn to the section in *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius* where Derrida proposes a reading of a few passages in Cixous's *Dream I Tell You*. This book had not yet been published at the time of Derrida's lecture, but he must have read the manuscript or proofs. He doesn't stress his privileged access – he simply introduces the volume, literally announcing its future appearance, as 'the book she is in the process of publishing, the one that remains unpublished and will follow the most recent one' (G, 25 [35]). There's even a note added by the editor confirming that Cixous's book will be published 'simultaneously with the present volume' (G, 26 [35]). In this apparently off-

---

which, he notes, 'she sometimes writes in a single word, like a name', though the example he gives, from her *Messie*, is '*Questceque*' (Jacques Derrida, *H. C. for Life, That Is to Say...*, trans., with additional notes, by Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006], 151-2 [*H. C. pour la vie, c'est à dire...* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), 129-30]; hereafter *HC*, with French page references in square brackets when the translation has been modified.

<sup>4</sup> See also G, 30, 74, 78-9 [40, 87, 91], *inter alia*.

handed manner, Derrida marks his unique reading position regarding the person and the works of Hélène Cixous: between the public and the private, the published and the unpublished, the biographical and the fictive, the work and the life. This scene of prepublication reading echoes another that I'll come to below, when Derrida describes receiving the manuscript of what would become Cixous's very first book, *Le Prénom de Dieu*, published in 1967.

*Dream I Tell You* is unique among Cixous's books: a selection of her dreams jotted down, as Derrida says, 'on waking, by hand, on the edge of the bed' (G, 40).<sup>5</sup> There are many dreams, dream fragments or sequences in Cixous's writing, sometimes explicit references to dreams. And it often seems that actual, real-life dreams-by-Hélène-Cixous have informed, more or less directly, more or less literally, these passages in her published work. But when dreams appear in the weave of Cixous's fiction, however allusive or apparently uninterpretable they may be, they are by definition transmuted into literature. *Dream I Tell You* is something else: verbatim dream transcriptions published in their brute form as a book. In this sense, it is not a work of literature. And yet the dreams are preceded by a short text entitled '*Avertissements*' in the French original, 'Warnings' or 'Forewarnings'. This is at best a paradoxical introduction, one that in some sense refuses access to the dreams, describing the collection a 'book of dreams without interpretation'.<sup>6</sup> A true dreambook, *Träume* with no *Deutung*. Yet there's plenty of meaning condensed into the '*Avertissements*', and even into this title itself: the word evokes weaving (*tisser*) and thus the textile, the 'stuff' of dreams, the woven textuality of the text. And it also contains a worm (*ver*) that happens to be an inverted dream (*rêve*), a palindrome one might relate to the fact that dream analysis, in the Freudian sense, aims to undo dreamwork, to work backwards from the manifest content of the dream as remembered or written – the coded text of the dream, condensed, for example, or displaced, jotted down at the edge of the bed – to the latent content, the original unconscious ideas or wishes. And something like dreamwork extends beyond the dreams themselves, at least to the title of this condemned entrance of an introduction. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Because what the title warns about in this performative way, what it alerts us to, whether we can interpret it or not, is a certain kind of wordplay.

We might consider wordplay to function here as a kind of shorthand for the condensed poetic textuality of Cixous's writing. However, Derrida takes things more literally it seems, and points out that that there are words or phrases in these '*Avertissements*' that could 'here or there' seem 'excessively playful and artificial' (G, 35). It is true that he's really, basically, saying the opposite: the logic of his reading here is that there are passages that may seem excessively playful and artificial, but in fact if you're patient, and continue reading, you'll realize that they're not. And yet this attempt to forestall a dismissive reading at some level validates it. Admittedly, Derrida is in part simply echoing something he has just quoted Cixous saying after she decomposes the word '*bistouri*', which appears in one of her dreams and means 'scalpel', into '*bisse tout ris*', meaning perhaps, among other possibilities, and it's the out-of-control multiplicity of possibilities that is important here, 'double every reef' or 'encore all laughter'. Cixous starts a new paragraph and writes: 'I'll stop here [*j'arrête*]: I don't want to irritate the rapidly alarmed adversaries of the philosophical, philosophicomic resources of

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also: 'at the moment of waking [...] upon waking, at dawn, [...] by hand, on the edge of the bed' (G, 39 [49]).

<sup>6</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Dream I Tell You*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 7 [*Rêve je te dis* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 17]. Translations slightly modified.

language.’<sup>7</sup> The author or the narrator of these ‘*Avertissements*’ doesn’t give an inch. For one thing, to say *j’arrête*, ‘I stop’ or ‘I’m stopping’, in the present, is not in fact or not only to stop. It does not only censor or silence what will not have been spoken, but actively draws attention to it, thereby both accentuating and effacing it. This paraliptical gesture, which is prolonged after the colon with the phrase ‘I don’t want to irritate [...]’, echoes the Cixousian refrain ‘*il ne faut pas le dire*’, ‘it must not be said’. A refrain that’s widely known and commented upon, not the least bit censured or secret. In the ambivalence of a saying-not-said, a telling not-to-tell, it indeed says something about writing, textuality, or in any case literature, as practised by Hélène Cixous. What Derrida translates as literature’s ‘secret’.

Interestingly, what is silenced here in Cixous’s ‘Forewarnings’ is the unfolding of a possible interpretation of the dream, and one might think interpretation or analysis should be on the side of philosophy, or in any case diurnal, rational thought, rather than that of the more nocturnal, poetic, oneiric use of language. But in a comic-serious move, Cixous draws battle lines between the ‘adversaries’ and, presumably, the supporters of the ‘resources of language’. These resources are clearly to be discovered in the realm of the dream, of poetry, of textuality and the playful ‘work’ of the signifier. This may all be in good fun, this ‘philosophicomical’ play, but no quarter is given, all the same. There is no indication here that the author-narrator accepts even in principle that there could be a limit to wordplay, a line beyond which playfulness or artificiality would be ‘excessive’. Only that in certain circumstances ‘it must not be said’. Which is something else altogether.

The logic of Derrida’s reading of this passage, while repeating, reformulating and supporting what Cixous says, seems to do so only up to a point, allowing the possibility that writing, perhaps even Cixous’s writing, ‘here or there’, could be ‘excessively playful and artificial’. Which might already seem rather surprising, coming from Derrida: you might think he would be fully aligned with the narrator of the ‘*Avertissements*’, that he’d affirm that no play, in writing, can ever be excessively playful, that no artifice can be too artificial. In fact, you might expect him to say that play is excess itself. Or that artifice is nothing if not an essential excess. That play or artifice cannot be reduced, that there is nothing ‘outside’ of them, that they can neither be opposed to nor taken as secondary regional modifications of some originary being or truth.

But he’s not saying this here. On the contrary, he seems to be saying that a certain amount of play is ok, a certain amount of artificiality, but it shouldn’t be taken too far.<sup>8</sup> He seems to be defending Cixous from the potential accusation that she might exceed in play and artifice any sensible norms. He seems to be validating the existence and necessity of such norms and limits, and affirming that Cixous or Cixous’s writing does not in fact exceed or disobey them. ‘She knows to stop’, he says, repeating with apparent naivete her knowing and non-silenced ‘*Je m’arrête*’, ‘on the brink of clever artificiality [*l’artificieux*’

<sup>7</sup> Cixous, *Dream*, 4 [13].

<sup>8</sup> There’s an echo, indeed, of this virtual, hypothetical reproach somewhat later, when Derrida points out that Echo teaches Narcissus a lesson about love, and narcissism, through ‘an effect of language’ that is, he adds, ‘almost a play on words’ (*HC*, 115), *presque un jeu de mots*. Is Derrida in the role of Narcissus here, to a Cixousian Echo? To be fair, we should probably read this more as a concern about the limitations of Cixous’s readership, and link it to Derrida’s worried, supportive, almost protective first reaction to her work as he describes it later in the book: ‘[...] while ceaselessly asking myself what kind of new species, what unique individual of a new unclassifiable species of literary animal or poetic prose I was dealing with, I no doubt began worrying. I believe I said to myself [...] that one is mad, they will never read or “one will never read”, one will never accept, one will never legitimize this [...] she goes too fast and with too much force, she lives too fast [...]’ (*HC*, 148).

*malin*], when the signifier, being mere signifier, is no longer significant [*quand le signifiant n'est plus signifiant de n'être que signifiant*] (G, 34-5 [44-5]). This is a wily formulation, admittedly, and *malin* can mean 'crafty', 'cunning', as well as 'evil'.<sup>9</sup> The final sequence in particular can't be said to be meaningless, exactly, and the translation proposed above is not implausible, but by repeating three times the same word, the signifier '*signifiant*' as it happens, it defies you to make sense of it. And in the first place to determine whether the same word is indeed each time the same word. It flirts suggestively, that is, on the undecidable edge of meaning, with semantic satiation as the signifier 'signifier', by dint of repetition, comes to signify, or in any case to effect, the end of signification... But that is precisely Derrida's point: in fact, he's performatively demonstrating what he's saying, pushing his text right up to the limit of meaning where playful artifice threatens to purify the text of any signification – and precisely with a repeated signifier and its multiple signifieds.

Derrida goes on to link 'the secret mutism of (self-)silencing [*du se taire*], and of the silenced-being [*l'être-tu*]' to the singular, personal law that is 'reserved, destined for you'. This is the paradox of a law (thus a social or communal norm) that applies only to one person, as for 'Kafka's man "before the law"', Derrida adds (G, 35 [45]). By implication or extension this links also to the question of genius as the unique exemplar of a category. Derrida continues: 'As for that which might, here or there in the "Avertissements", seem excessively playful and artificial, for example concerning the "*bisse tout ris*" in three words, it is enough to wait and to refer, in this volume, to the dream of 9 January 1995 [...]' (G, 35 [45]). Derrida is saying that while the 'Avertissements' seem to take excessive liberties of playfulness and artificiality by decomposing or recomposing the word '*bistouri*' into the three words '*bisse tout ris*', in fact there is a rational, non-playful, non-artificial explanation for this in one of the dreams contained in the book. Of course, we should already be alerted that something is amiss here, given that Derrida is appealing to a dream as the guarantor of rational, non-playful, non-artificial logic.

Derrida then points out that in this dream, the dreamer orders her mother,

'Eve, the mother-midwife in real life [...] to "take her *bistouri*", while Thessa (alias Thessie) holds in her mouth a cushion on which can be seen a mysterious tiger, strangely nicknamed "*petigre*", we wonder who this could be, and who seems to be in the know [*qui paraît en savoir long*], painted on the pillow, a substitute for a lost little cat, etc.' (G, 35-6 [45-6]).

And that's it. Derrida doesn't develop any further his explanation or justification of this apparently excessively playful and artificial wordplay. His citation-summary of a fragment of the dream serves to establish that the word '*bistouri*' figures there, but it doesn't, at least on the surface, explain why breaking this signifier down into the three words '*bisse tout ris*' in the 'Avertissements' would be less than excessively playful and artificial.

Unless it does, of course. Let's not forget this *petigre*. We're up against the secret, the secret Derrida has been at once thematising and theorising, the theme of the secret he

---

<sup>9</sup> Somewhere in the background here is another genius: Descartes' *malin génie*, the ultimate artificer who fictionalizes everything. We could even say the *malin génie* is a figure, *avant la lettre*, of the all-powerfulness-other of literary genius. From this point of view, at least, it's curious Derrida doesn't seem to be drawn to the ambiguity of the word *malin*, which means 'malign', 'malignant', 'evil', but also, with an antiphrastical spin, 'cunning', 'knowing', 'clever'. Part of the genius of the *malin génie* is that he or she turns bad into good, vice into virtue, fiction into reality. And vice versa.

has isolated in Cixous's work and a theory of the literary secret, of literature as having a privileged relation to the secret, applied to Cixous's writing. It's almost as if Derrida's explanation, his exposition or revelation of the secret at work or play in Cixous's text itself participates in it and even recreates it, re-secrets it in its own weave. A web that envelops a web. Who can say? That's the thing about textuality. Derrida says as much, in fact, a few pages earlier, while talking about avowal and disavowal: only the un-avowable can be avowed, but even if the un-avowable 'is avowed, even if it finds itself avowed, it remains unavowable, therefore unavowed. The secret is that one never exceeds the unavowable, one never gets out of it, and thus one never avows' (G, 32 [42]).

Still, it's hard not to get the sense that Derrida is hinting here at his own implication in the text he is reading. We might take this to be a special case or even simply an illustration among others of another of Derrida's major themes in this book: the impossible-to-define border between Cixous's work and her life, between her public and private lives also, between the writing that constitutes her published work, her oeuvre, and her many writings, including the vast majority of her dreams, that remain, sometimes uneasily, sometimes undecidably, outside the work, hors d'oeuvre. One of the motifs of this deconstruction, in *Geneses*, revolves around Cixous's gift of her archives to the library, and problematizes the border between 'the library and what's outside it, the book and the non-book, literature and its others, the archivable and the non-archivable' (G, 18). Yet this deconstruction has the paradoxical geometry of what Derrida describes early in the book as a 'topodynamics of the smallest being bigger than the biggest' (G, 19)<sup>10</sup> and that he returns to much later when he explores 'toponymical and topological paradoxes' whereby 'the belonging of an element to a set [*ensemble*] never excludes the inclusion of that set itself (the biggest) in the element that it is supposed to contain (the smallest)' (G, 71). Derrida is talking about what he calls 'Hélène Cixous's archivable corpus' which, he points out, comprises both 'works published under the heading of literature' and 'texts of all kinds that are neither dependent on nor independent of the literary oeuvre *stricto sensu* and as such' (G, 71). So, there's a paradoxical topography of the corpus as well as of the relation of the corpus to the library.

## The Element of the Element

Before following Derrida further, near the end of *Geneses*, as he returns to this mad metonymy of the large in the small, the whole in the part on the occasion of Cixous's archival gift to the library, let me point out that this is not the first time Derrida has recourse, in talking about Cixous's writing, to the strange logic of this aporetic topography. In *H. C. for Life*, Derrida encounters a similar structure when discussing her work's 'element'. Early in the essay, he describes himself as

powerless [...] to deal with my subject consistently and to live up to a work whose very *element* [*élément*; Derrida's emphasis] is a brilliant [*géniale*] and impregnable provocation, which turns each of its atomical elements into a part bigger than the very element, namely the whole, the milieu, the comprehensive set, the metonymico-atomic element that comprises all the elements. (HC, 22 [26])

<sup>10</sup> Note that the comparative, 'bigger than', and the superlative, 'the biggest', both hinge on the same word '*plus*', such that this strange 'topodynamics' is effected in the French syntax here, where the small overtakes the big through a kind of apposition, the smallerbigger: '*[le] plus petit plus grand que le plus grand*'.

It's a familiar Derridian move: one word turns out to mean two opposite things, thereby deconstructing the opposition, demonstrating that neither of the terms can be purified of the other; it follows that there are only ever different combinations or interpenetrations of the two. So it is with 'element', in English as in French: on the one hand, an element is a constitutive part of something, while on the other, it's the whole, or rather the pervasive, undifferentiated medium out of which any particular whole emerges as such. By deconstructing the opposition, the word 'element' demands we attend to the mixes, for example, here, a part that contains the whole.

Derrida then personalizes this reflection on the double 'element' of Cixous's work, bearing witness to it even as he appropriates it, co-implicating himself in it as he problematizes the border between subject and object, reader and writer, oeuvre and hors d'oeuvre, public and private:

I love this word, element, to designate [Cixous's] work, which I read as naturally as I breathe [*que je lis comme je respire*], that I read [*lis*] and forget [*oublie*] and forgetread [*oublis*] all the time [...], a work that I have known as much as I have failed to know and been ignorant of almost forever. This work remains for me all the more difficult to think and present since it is, on my side, elemental, the element of the element (*HC*, 23).

Derrida describes Cixous's work as an element of the all-encompassing kind, like the air he breathes: both a mundane, every-day activity and a vital, life-giving one. He also plays here on the expression *mentir comme on respire*, 'to lie as one breathes', 'to be a born liar', suggesting that he reads her compulsively, unavoidably, even as the *ment* of *mentir* is legible in the *élément* that pervades the text: the lie that is fiction itself.

Derrida returns to this quasi-confession much later in the same book, when he asks for forgiveness for his 'Forget-reading and betrayal' of Cixous's work:

Ever since I have known her, I have read her and I keep forgetting that she writes, I keep forgetting what she writes. This forgetting is not a forgetting like any other; it is elemental, I probably live on it. Her work for me will remain for life as what I have already forgotten a priori: I forget it as naturally as I breathe [*je l'oublie comme je respire*]' (*HC*, 152 [131]).

It's somewhat uncanny to read this same formula repeated with a slight difference from one end to the other of the book. This uncanniness is performative and in a sense literal, as the forgetting-reading *oublire* is acted out across the book, between an early reading and a late forgetting: 'I read [it] as I breathe', on page 23, and 'I forget it as I breathe', on page 152.

This paradoxical element of the element is also in play in the passage towards the end of *Geneses* that probes the line between the inside and the outside of Cixous's literary oeuvre, the life and the work, the big and the small, the container and the contained. Derrida says:

The smallest is big with the biggest, the small is bigger than the biggest, the *petigre* is capable of the tiger, it can be the tiger [*il peut le tigre*]. Jonas is bigger than the Whale, and the corpus remains disproportionally vaster than the library supposed to archive it (*G*, 71-2 [84]).

Note the re-emergence here of the *petigre* that we first encountered in Derrida's discussion of the limits, or not, of the 'excessively playful and artificial' in the 'Avertissements' to Cixous's *Dream I Tell You*. In that context, Derrida had called it a nickname, a *surnom*:

the mysterious figure on the cushion in the dream of 9 January 1995 is ‘strangely nicknamed [*surnommé*] “*petigre*”’ (G, 35). This *surnom*, as the noun suggests, is an over-name or surname, a name that overlays another or is added on as a supplement. *Petigre* is a neologism, if that word applies to names or nicknames: it fuses the word for ‘small’, in its masculine form, *petit*, with that for ‘tiger’, *tigre*, by means of a shared syllable [*ti*].

As it happens, this neologism is not in fact very novel, but rather a kind of discreetly insistent returning marker or handle in the ‘corpus’ of Cixous’s work, often seeming to refer to a kind of unconditional friend or lover. Of course, unconditional love is one of the essential, living, pulsating threads that run through this corpus – not, interestingly, really something that Derrida highlights<sup>11</sup> – so the chances that any particular *surnom* would name an absolute lover there are probably not insignificant.

Either way, Derrida’s behaviour here is arguably somewhat odd: he first entertains the possibility that Cixous’s text might be ‘excessively playful and artificial’, and then in the guise of an exculpation simply gestures to a dream, without offering a ‘serious’ explication of it, without providing an interpretative key to unlock a hidden meaning coded into signifiers that would otherwise be nothing but playful and artificial. Which all serves only to draw our attention to a mysterious *petigre*. We might even come to think that in this way, Derrida is effectively inserting himself into the text, more or less playfully, more or less artificially, whether consciously, intentionally, or not, virtually identifying with this character in Cixous’s dream. As if *petigre* were a nickname, a *surnom* or, as it’s also called in French, a *petit nom*, a ‘little name’, for ‘Derrida’. Of course, even to say this, conditionally, hypothetically, would be to go too far: part of Derrida’s point here is that the secret of/as literature is such that we’ll never know, once and for all, what’s what and who’s who.

We could do worse, at this juncture, than to meditate on a certain page in Cixous’s *Corollaires d’un vœu*, a book published in 2015 about a long, complicated, absolute love affair with a certain Isaac, among others. It’s a page that interrupts or feigns to interrupt the book’s narrative with an extradiegetic warning to its ‘readers’, in fact responding, already, in the book, to its readers, warning them against reducing fiction to reality – and against reducing reality to reality, for that matter. On a page towards the end of the book, we find three lines: ‘*Notebook B August 2015 / There are readers who tell me: I know who Isaac is. / Isaac, I say, it’s me / I – who write him [c’est moi – qui l’écris].*’<sup>12</sup> This is a page with a strange topo-temporality, at once inside and outside of the book and of the oeuvre: for one thing, the readers of the book are here inscribed in it, and for another,

---

<sup>11</sup> This is an enormous question that I hope to address in some detail elsewhere, but there’s an extraordinary moment in *H. C. for Life* when Derrida is preparing to quote a fragment from one of Cixous’s books, some ‘live words [*mots en vie*]’ with which he hopes to ‘try [his] luck at a salutation-salvation [*la chance d’un salut*]’ (HC, 69 [63]), where *salut* means both salvation (received) and salutation (offered). It’s wonderfully odd: he is going to take some words from one of her books and cite them as a salutation offered back to her, yet also in the hopes of gaining his own salvation from her. No doubt we all owe a *salut* to Hélène Cixous, he says. And then he continues, seemingly stressing the ‘salvation’ side of the word: ‘Do we owe it to her? Yes, but this *salut* that I owe her, I do not feel like labouring the point that I owe it to her – one does not owe a *salut* any more than a grace. This language of debt was between us, from the beginning, irrelevant and in-commensurate, out of proportion [*hors de propos et dé-mesuré, hors de proportion*]’ (69 [63]). We’re in the realm of the unconditional gift here, not far from what we might call a feminine libidinal economy.

<sup>12</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Abstracts et Brèves Chroniques du temps II, Corollaires d’un vœu* (Paris: Galilée, 2015), 110. All translations are my own.

given that the book was published in 2015, in September as the colophon has it, this 'notebook' is probably, almost certainly a fiction, a projection, a future anterior, an emanation of the diegetic interior of the fiction into the future of its reception or its reading. This '*Isaac [...] c'est moi*' is also an ironic throw-back to Flaubert's real-life declaration about his famous character,<sup>13</sup> though here it's impossible to know whether the sentence says that Isaac 'is' the narrator/author or whether it says that it's she who writes him.

Many pages earlier we had read: 'Who is Isaac? I won't say that he was this or that. Or else, I could say "Isaac is me [*Isaac c'est moi*]", and that would at least have the truth of fiction.'<sup>14</sup> We can read this 'Isaac is me', 'Isaac, that's me' as the narrator holding up her hand as if under interrogation and confessing or taking responsibility: 'It's me; I did it', 'look no further', 'I'm responsible for "Isaac"', 'I'm guilty of creating or committing "Isaac"'. In other words: "'Isaac" has no truth or reality outside of the book, he's a pure fiction, stop trying to read the work off the life'. This is amusing, but it leaves the problem of identity, not to mention of authorial responsibility, whole: '*moi*' is a shifter, in the linguistic sense, and as such, its signification depends on the context of enunciation. Which here is not just a full-blown fiction, but a fiction that actively deconstructs the border between its inside and its outside. Similarly, the 'truth of fiction', the status of the narrator's confession, is at once an oxymoron and a pleonasm, both self-evident and uninterpretable: we simply can't say. Truth and fiction are not mutually opposable; more truth does not come at the price of less fiction.

The following line also seems to be responding to the question 'Who is Isaac', as if the affirmation that the previous answer was the truth (of fiction) hadn't entirely settled the matter: 'Writing in person, a being who never stops weaving, creating, the writer himself [*l'écrivain même*], the only living one I know – this I can say.'<sup>15</sup> This is a wonderfully coy feint: on the one hand the narrator is saying that Isaac is 'writing in person', *l'écriture en personne*, which we might well read as 'a person made of writing', a pure fiction, in other words. And in this sense the narrator is breaching the fourth wall, so to speak, to warn nose-y or naïve readers against doing the same, against sauntering into the book as if it were reality and affixing labels on things, that is, on signifiers, to warn readers against imposing a reductive, realist interpretation of what is after all a character, and a word, in a work of literature. But on the other hand, the narrator is also describing a 'real' person here, saying that this person, 'Isaac', is unique among all living people known to her (though the implication is that she knows dead people who are also 'writing in person') in that he is writing in the flesh. As if this one person uniquely abolishes or in any case deconstructs the line between life and literature, writing and living.

This deconstruction is performed in the word itself, the neologism *écrivain*. This word seems to be a synonym for 'writer', *écrivain*, with the (masculine) suffix -eur (generally forming an agent noun from a verb: someone who writes) replacing the (masculine) suffix -ain (forming an adjective or noun, generally signifying one who comes from, belongs to or is associated with a place, thing or activity). Yet at the same time, the 't' ending of the root brings it closer to the past participle, *écrit*, 'written' or a 'writing'. And *écrivain* sounds and looks very much like *écriture*, the noun 'writing'. They

<sup>13</sup> The fact that this 'real-life' declaration is very likely apocryphal only adds another real-fictive twist to the narrative...

<sup>14</sup> Cixous, *Corollaires*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Cixous, *Corollaires*, 30.

are anagrams, in fact, and thus the 'writing in person', the writing and the writer, *l'écriture* and *l'écrivain*, are literally impossible to entirely disentangle in this oddly familiar hapax *écrivain*.

Returning to *Geneses*, we find something similar with those odd signifiers, *petigre* and *bistouri*, that Derrida considers to be at the edge of excessive playfulness and artificiality: for one thing, they come from a dream, and so at the very least, by dint of overdetermination and displacement if not secondary elaboration, they will always defy any univocal, definitive interpretation. But they also arguably mark a point where the inside of the oeuvre enfolds its outside, and where the reader, in this case Derrida, is also in some sense on the side of the read. One could always contend that Derrida is simply offering himself, his person or his life, his life history and living relations, as an example of a general, even universal structure, that he's simply using his own personal case, his private relationship with the person and the corpus of Hélène Cixous, as an example to illustrate his point about this paradoxical topography of which Cixous's archive and its incorporation by the BnF would itself be simply a particularly striking manifestation.

## The Undecided

All the same, it's hardly news that Derrida is anything but an impartial reader of Cixous's work. One only need recall the passage, early in *H. C. for Life*, where Derrida presents himself not as Cixous's 'impresario', 'showman' or 'presenter' ('*annonceur*', '*montreur*') in a kind of circus, perhaps a cabaret or talent show, but as her 'prophet', no less: 'As if I had seen or heard her before the others and were coming to say, inheriting the rightful anger of certain prophets who address their people: what on earth are you waiting for to see and hear her? Beware the wrath of history – or of God, if you prefer' (*HC*, 15 [20]).

But what exactly is Derrida's 'reading' relation to the person and the work of Hélène Cixous, to her bio-bibliography? One of the most legible, most unambiguously foregrounded tropes of *H. C. for Life* is that of the two 'sides' that join-separate them. This is presented by Derrida at the outset as a question of life and death – she on the side of life; he on the side of death: 'I keep forever reminding her each time, on my side, that we die in the end [...] She, on her side, [...] believes none of it' (*HC*, 2). It is true that much of the book is concerned with formulating something like a Cixousian theory of life, and yet the Cixous/Derrida binary opposition that Derrida returns to again and again concerns their relations more generally as readers, as writers, as bodies of work and as bodies tout court, as 'individuals'. Here is one key sequence:

In everything I myself will say today, I will not be on her side. This may be the condition for me to attempt to speak of her or to her. If I were on her side, I could not speak of her nor tell her anything whatsoever. Nor especially receive anything whatsoever from her. Not the slightest grace. I am therefore not on her side.

Unless [...] I manage neither to speak to her nor precisely to speak of her, neither to receive from her nor to recall her, [...] because I remain too much on her side. [...] If I were on her side, I could not say anything of her nor to her, but I could not see anything come from her any better. And I cannot be reconciled to that idea (*HC*, 20-1).

The question of sides here is not one of life versus death. Or if it is, it is a question of two different kinds of life, perhaps two life drives, though we sense that for Derrida this life-choice is particularly grave. Derrida is both decisive and undecided. He presents his

sidedness as clearly the result of a decision, and not simply a pre-existing fact or state of affairs, not some 'natural' predisposition. And yet an uncertainty seems to ghost him. As if the decisiveness of his decision to take sides ('I will not be on her side [...] I am [...] not on her side [...] I cannot be reconciled to this') can only emerge against the background of a baseline indecision or undecidability. It is only because one can never be certain whose side is whose that *taking* a side is meaningful or even possible. Derrida's un-de-sidedness. Nonetheless, there is something important at stake in this decision concerning relations between people, between texts, and between people and texts. Because Derrida needs to accentuate the differences if he hopes to have a relation with Cixous or with her oeuvre, he needs to choose 'not to stand on her side' so as to be able to 'speak [...] to her', to 'speak of her' and to 'receive [...] from her'. It's as if the decision to stand on the opposing side itself stands in metaphorically for decision-making in general: when deciding entails distinguishing between things, separating them, here cutting himself off from her side to take up his position on the opposite side.

Yet it is also true that in the same book, often on the same page where he underlines the distinction or the alternative between sides, and his non-neutrality, that is, his hierarchisation of the binary, his strong preference for one side over the other, Derrida also systematically deconstructs these oppositions. I have already pointed to a certain uncertainty as the condition of any decisiveness, but the deconstruction of these oppositions is more insistent, more consequential, more central to Derrida's characterisation of his relations to Cixous than simply the enabling premise of a decision. For example, in the very paragraph where he establishes this rule of the two sides and the principle that he must not 'remain too much on her side', he also writes: 'I am sure neither to be on [my side] nor what 'shore' [*côte*], 'bank' [*rive*] and 'side' [*côté*] mean here. [...] I no longer know which side I am on and from which side I am about to speak (neither on hers nor on mine)' (HC, 21).

What is the significance of Derrida's double gesture here, both deconstructing and affirming the binary relation? Elsewhere I will try to take this question in the direction of a kind of deconstructive ethics or politics of de-sidedness. But my first impulse in attempting to think the relations between 'sides' as they play out in *H. C. for Life*, the relation to the other when it counts, when something is at stake in friendship and/or love, is to appeal to a rudimentary psychoanalytical idiom and describe the alternative Derrida posits as involving on the one hand *desire*, the two-opposed-sides structure where irreducible difference, non-identity, is the condition of intercourse or exchange, and on the other hand *identification*, the same-side relation of a shared or a mirrored identity that's linked to a certain narcissism, the appropriation of the other into the self, you or your image reflecting back to me as an ideal ego or an ego ideal.

Within this frame, Derrida's 'decision', that is, his choice of the 'other' side, the side opposite Cixous's side, is a choice of desire over identification. In Freud's psychosexual origin story, everything turns on such a fateful decision. For the little boy, if things go according to plan – the heteronormative gender-hierarchised socio-sexual plan for the production of human subjectivity that Freud was attempting to explain – the little boy under the threat of castration chooses to identify with his father while abandoning his libidinal cathexis of his mother, causing the collapse or 'dissolution' of the Oedipus complex. Arguably the boy chooses identification over desire as much as he is choosing the father over the mother. For the girl, things happen somewhat differently, worse, or possibly better, depending on one's interpretation, but the either/or alternative between desire and identification is very much the primordial and inaugural human choice as Freud

sees it. Admittedly, the rule of a strict mutual incompatibility between identification and desire underwrites the heteronormative bias of Freud's theory, or at least of the society his theory aimed to describe. And perhaps there is something of this at the moments when Derrida stresses the either/or choice – although his choice of desire over identification, unlike the Oedipal boy, would seem be more clearly aligned with the girl's refusal to abandon her one and only love. So even here, the positions are not clear-cut. And in any case, Derrida plays both sides of the game, taking sides and refusing to take sides.

Yet Derrida hardly talks of identification. When naming desire's other, within the psychoanalytic lexicon, he opts for 'narcissism' much more frequently than 'identification'. As we'll see, things are more complicated, at least to the extent that Derrida paradoxically identifies with Cixous... as a narcissist. Indeed, he punctuates the book with a series of somewhat tongue-in-cheek apophatic dis/avowals of his own narcissistic investment in this study of Cixous.<sup>16</sup> But to begin with, at least, Derrida approaches this question of narcissism as if from the outside, from the other side, as a literary-critical rather than a biographical or autobiographical question. In a passage where he is trying to 'think' Cixous's *puissance* or 'mighty power', the one 'she testifies to and the one she experiments with', in other words 'a mighty power of the might', *une puissance du 'puisse'* (HC, 107) that he also calls the 'absolute performative' (HC, 104), Derrida is predictably drawn into a discussion of what he calls 'Freud's half-baked theory about the omnipotence of thoughts' (HC, 112). This brings Derrida to point out that Freud considers an 'originary narcissism' to be at the origin of the omnipotence of thought. Derrida writes: 'The omnipotence of thought is narcissistic, it is this tautology of absolute speed [...] of living life' (HC, 114). And yet Derrida is careful not to oppose narcissism too quickly or too crudely to desire. In fact, he loses no time in deconstructing the apparent opposition:

Narcissism has no contrary, no other side, no beyond, and love for the other, respect for the other, self-denial in favour of the other do not interrupt any narcissistic movement. [...] One must love oneself living in order to love the other [...] To love the other as oneself supposes the teletachycardic unlimitedness of narcissistic might. The mightier narcissism is, the more it loves the other. [...] Narcissism is the elementary condition of love (HC, 115).

Admittedly, narcissism is asking for it, or in any case Narcissus, in desiring the one he is or resembles, in becoming the one he desires perhaps: begging the question of the deconstruction of the desire-identification binary. But however primordial this 'originary' narcissism may be, it only makes any sense on the back of a basic opposition between desire, predicated on difference, and identification, as a sameness or similarity. Freud's shoe-horning in of 'ego libido' before any relation at all, of any sort, to an (external) other, as the mechanism of this primary narcissism, does little to change this situation, especially given that there can be no fundamental psychoanalytical difference between the 'external' object and the 'internal' object that is figured here as the ego.

However, in the middle of this vigorous deconstruction of the narcissism-love binary, we suddenly realise that there's another agenda on Derrida's mind. Because he suddenly blurts out, as an apparent non-sequitur, at least to the extent that up until now

---

<sup>16</sup> For example: '(I intimated that I will not speak of myself. [...]) But allow me one next to last parenthesis of an exceptionally personal nature, outside of literature, or at the crossroads between literature and what one calls life [...]' (HC, 57). Or again: 'I promised not to speak of myself, of/on my side, unless as a pretext to speak of her [...]' (48), or: '(I will not speak about myself but [...])' (9).

the discussion has been perfectly general, abstract, in no way dependant on a reference to the proper names or the protagonists with whom the book is ostensibly concerned: 'Apart from myself [*À part moi*], will I dare say that I know nobody who is more impossibly narcissistic than Hélène Cixous, in her-life-her-works?' (HC, 115). The structure of this sentence is somewhat ambiguous in that we're not sure whether he's saying that he knows no one more narcissistic than Cixous or that he knows no one more narcissistic than Cixous except himself. That is, whether he's placing Cixous number 1 and selflessly relegating himself to number 2, or on the contrary, he's narcissistically, and thus performatively, positioning himself above her in the hit parade ranking of narcissists.

Either way, the effect of these two massive narcissists face to face or side by side is perfectly comical. It's not Narcissus and Echo, but Narcissus and Narcissus, a paradoxical pairing since narcissism would be on the side of identification and/as the constitution of the ego, a kind of total exappropriational mastery of the other, introjection if not incorporation. We might say that the two relations, Echo-Narcissus and Narcissus-Narcissus, which are kept strictly separate in Ovid, rather like desire and identification in Freud, are undecidably comingled here. And all bets are off if one Echo-Narcissus takes a shine to another.<sup>17</sup>

And thus it's hardly a surprise that Derrida continues, 'That's why she and I keep each other at a respectful distance [*nous nous tenons en respect*], and with the greatest possible respect, each to one side' (HC, 115). Again, the oppositions are both affirmed and challenged: he identifies with her as a narcissist, i.e. as one who auto-identifies, and yet this identificatory *mise en abyme* produces a distancing, the stand-offishness of a 'respect', a *tenir en respect*, the respectful gaze that keeps its distance, staving off the identificatory collapse into a constituted subject, however alienated. Thus, this excess of identification paradoxically gives onto an opposite-sides relation that is the condition of desire. And that is precisely what Derrida stresses throughout this passage, notably by pointing out that narcissism, as self-love or ego libido, and desire, as love of the-other-on-the-other-side, are not incompatible.

Something similar happens in one of the rare instances where Derrida explicitly identifies with Cixous or decidedly places himself on her side. It is an extraordinary passage, again in *H. C. for Life*. Derrida has just finished saying that he 'forgets' Cixous's writing 'as [he] breathes', that her writing, for him, is 'elementary', in the sense of the element that he breathes or that sustains him, and that he 'probably live[s] on it [*que j'en vis*: that I live on or off it, thanks to it]' (HC, 152). He continues by saying that this relation to her texts, reading-forgetting them, living off them and breathing them, is similar to his relation to 'those canonical texts that contain everything', or 'where one can find everything [*où l'on trouve tout*]', and he gives the examples of Shakespeare and the Bible, Joyce, Blanchot and Kafka. But there's a vital difference. In these other great writers' works, Derrida says, you can indeed find everything, because everything has been said there, '*everything is well said*', '*tout est bien dit*', like a '*benedictum*'. But in the case of Cixous's oeuvre, it's an everything-is-well-said that has happened or has been happening 'a moment ago [*tout à l'heure*]', hers is a canonical oeuvre happening just now, that is '*contemporaneous*, living beside me [*vivant à côté de moi*] and in the process of continuing [*en train de continuer*]' (HC, 153).

<sup>17</sup> Of course, Narcissus and narcissism, no less than the Mirror Stage, are stories: fictions about fiction, and above all about the impossible line between reality and fiction – the way the one comes to constitute the other.

This, it seems to me, is the most important *côté* in the book, this ‘side-by-side with me’, on or ‘at my side’, this ‘beside me’ and maybe above all, this ‘in the process of continuing’. Where the side, the *à côté de*, is not so much a geometrical or topographical question, not the distant shores, the watershed, the recto-verso or the opposing side, but a temporal, that is, an on-going, an on-living one. A living one, but living as continuing, from here on inheriting-and-inventing both the past and the future, on the way, along the way. Note that this description by Derrida of Cixous as a canonical writer who is *à côté de moi* and, in this somewhat awkward formula, *en train de continuer*, ‘in the process of continuing’, echoes closely Cixous’s description cited above from *Corollaires* of ‘Isaac’ as ‘writing-in-person’ and as ‘the only one I know who is alive’, ‘*le seul que je connaisse vivant*’, the only writing-writer (*écrivain*) ‘that I have known when he is living’.<sup>18</sup>

Or we could turn to another astonishing and moving moment near the end of the book when Derrida is describing his first impressions upon reading Cixous’s first manuscript, no doubt in 1966:

I must have experienced a double feeling: enchanted admiration, quasi-religious fright (what on earth is happening here?), like someone who, walking all alone in a desert of despairing [*désespérance*: un-hopefulness] (this feeling that was and still remains mine but which I bore and suffered from with more difficulty back then), sees a sort of miracle suddenly appear, which he is afraid of mistaking for a mirage, which he feels the desire to both recognise/reconnoitre by getting near it and flee from by warding it off (*HC*, 147).

There is a double desire here, not a desire doubled by an identification, but a double, apparently contradictory desire, to approach and to flee. Just as the ‘miracle’ is mirrored by a ‘mirage’ of the same derivation. And there is a double fear as well: the fear of the miracle (urge to flee), but also what we sense is a graver fear, the fear of misinterpreting Cixous’s genius as only a mirage. We suspect that these apparent opposites experienced by the young Derrida are ripe for deconstruction, and indeed that in this double but non-contradictory desire we could read in advance the matrix of Derrida’s relation to Cixous’s oeuvre in general (reading elementally and forgetting, inside and out). And that we could take the double fear to in fact convey something essential about literature, about its other-allpowerfulness or its ‘Omnipotence-other’:<sup>19</sup> that the miracle can never not be shadowed by the mirage, that for the miracle to be a miracle, it must be possible for it to be a mirage. It is interesting too that the fort-da Derrida effectuates, recounted here in a retrospective autobiographical third person, at once or successively ‘getting near’ and ‘flee[ing]’ Cixous’s work, seems to set the dynamics of his relation to her writing, already with the receipt of this first manuscript.

The young Derrida walking in the ‘desert of hopeless despairing desperation [*désespérance*]’ is alone, all alone, and without hope, but when he receives Cixous’s first manuscript, he immediately recognizes the arrival of this living, continuing *benedictum*. Again, it’s clear that Derrida is not just any reader of Cixous, but that his reading of her, his reading-forgetting, must have from the start played something like a constitutive role in his own development as an author himself capable of ‘*everything is well said*’. But then, still describing the effect on him of the arrival of this first manuscript, he says:

---

<sup>18</sup> Cixous, *Corollaires*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> The question of this ‘*toute puissance-autre*’ of literature is one that Derrida picks up from Cixous, notably her *Manhattan*, and develops at length in *G* 47-73 *passim*.

I believe I said to myself, [...] *identifying with her while separating myself from her*, resolutely [*vivement*] keeping at a distance: that one is mad, they will never read [her] [...] she doesn't see that a true resistance will be organized, or else it will take the work of generations, she goes too fast and with too much force, she lives too fast (*HC*, 148, emphasis added).

Here again the 'identification' is accompanied by its apparent opposite, the distance, the separation of the other side. And the distance is only necessary, or even possible, because of the identification; it is because of the identification and the recognition that the 'fright' and the urge to 'flee', the distance – I want to say the love or the desire – makes any sense.

## A Literally Living Subjunctive Surprise

I'd like to offer one last indication or clue from *H. C. for Life* supporting the thesis of Derrida's complex, non-disinterested, we might say invaginated or not-undecided position, with regard to 'Hélène Cixous'. In a paragraph where Derrida leaves Freud on the line, putting him on hold for a while, he formulates a paradoxical 'line of reading' which is as follows: 'there is no rule for reading the prodigies of this mighty power [i.e. Cixous's works], there is no other rule than to invent the rule with each letter in order to countersign' (*HC*, 104). He then returns to the question of the impotent all-powerful power of the subjunctive *puisse* that he has derived from, and for, Cixous's writing. And on a whim, he opens the dictionary.

Derrida has just been tangling with the expression '*c'est*', 'it is', which he describes as the '*principale ontologique*', the 'ontological main clause'. *La principale* here is a grammatical term for the main clause of a sentence, as distinct from *la subordonnée*, the subordinate clause. Derrida glosses this ontological main clause, 'it is', as 'the present indicative of the verb, therefore of the constative, for example, of the verb "to be"' (*HC*, 104). And he opposes the subjunctive and thus subordinate *puisse*, which he has linked to and indeed derived from Cixous's work, to this indicative *c'est*. The indicative ought to be more powerful than the subjunctive, according to traditional grammatical and philosophical hierarchies, the main clause (*la principale*) ought to be more powerful than the subordinate clause (*la subordonnée*). And yet Derrida sees things the other way round. He affirms that 'the subjunctive is mightier [*plus puissant*], from the subordinate clause [*depuis la subordonnée*], than the ontological main clause [*la principale ontologique*].' (*HC*, 105). This logic of insubordination echoes the paradoxical logic Derrida has been developing throughout the book to account for or describe the strange infinitely inventive power of Cixous's work: that of the smaller element that's bigger than the bigger element, the archived work that's bigger than the archive in which it is archived, and above all, here, the subjunctive *puisse*, this '(would that) it could', '(if only) it might', that is more powerful, contrary to all expectation, than the present indicative 'it is'.

But this constative, indicative, present, ontological main clause is also what I would call, with a kind of shorthand, via a somewhat false-friend translation, an ontological principle: the self-assured predominance of the self-same, that which is, here, now, just exactly what it is. What Derrida had once called the metaphysics of presence and developed deconstruction to deconstruct. It goes without saying that Cixous's work, this 'wonder' for which there are no pre-given rules, is on the side of deconstruction, if it is a side, and of the *puisse*, rather than that of ontology, metaphysics and binary logic.

Yet there's a problem in this neat division, because as Derrida points out, '*c'est*' is a homophone of the French pronunciation of the letter 'C', as in 'H. C.' Via this patronymic initial 'C', Cixous is thus fatefully aligned not with the subjunctive *puisse*, but with the *c'est* of the ontological principle and the *principale ontologique*. This connection, and the threat it represents, may seem playful and artificial, but their significance can't be overestimated. To justify this claim, I need to summarize telegraphically what I think of as Derrida's deconstructive dispatch, his *modus operandi* across the entire body of his work with surprisingly few exceptions, maybe no exceptions at all, or maybe just one. It goes like this: from text to text, right through his career, Derrida reads one after the other various respectable, thoughtful writers, philosophers, critics or literary authors, sometimes artists, old and new; he points out admiringly the deconstructive or proto-deconstructive aspects of their work; but at some point he pivots to highlight the places where they come up short, where they get cold feet, where they revert to that same old reassuring binary metaphysical thinking; leaving himself alone, again. The case of 'Hélène Cixous' is the only full and unambiguous counterexample I know.

And sure enough Derrida doesn't miss a beat here: after the *c'est* of C, he points out that the *hache* – which means 'axe', but is a homophone of the French pronunciation of the letter H – this *hache* of H. C. (pronounced in French) 'interrupts' the ontological principle, the main clause of the *c'est*. He concludes, triumphantly: 'H. C. is something other than the "*c'est*" of the ontological principle [*la principale ontologique*]' (HC, 105 [92]). Just in the nick of time, this providential axe comes to confirm – interrupting what might have seemed like a destiny yet without inverting the hierarchy, remaining in its subordinate position – that the powerful-powerless subjunctive *puisse* is more powerful, more *puissant*, coming from or relating to 'H. C.', than the ontological principle.

High on this subjunctive deconstructive conquest, Derrida opens the dictionary: 'I looked up the word "subjunctive" in my dictionary and I immediately fell upon this: "The subjunctive is mainly the mood of the subordinate clause [*la subordonnée*]. First example: "That Jacques be alive did not surprise her much [*Que Jacques fût vivant ne la surprenait guère*]"' (HC, 105). It's certainly a case, to all appearances, right here and right down to the apparently impulsive whim, of the omnipotence of thought, if not of telepathy: Derrida opens the dictionary, *his* dictionary (*mon dictionnaire*), and what does he find but very precisely inscribed there a pithy condensation of the opening argument and returning refrain of the whole book he is in the process of writing. And even of the whole Jacques Derrida-Hélène Cixous relationship, as it is described there, i.e. that 'I am always and each time reminding her, from my side, that we die in the end, too quickly. And I must always begin again. / Because she, since she loves living, doesn't believe me' (HC, 2 [9-10]).

In other words, the very 'first example' in this unnamed dictionary has already in effect telepathically formulated what Derrida is in the process of developing in this book: the subjunctive mood of living, '*fût vivant*', undecidably past and present, and thus already spectral, but according to a living spectrality, if I can put it that way, 'that Jacques be living', and especially the lack of 'surprise' on 'her' part, on her side, 'that Jacques be living did not surprise her much' or 'hardly surprised her', the supreme confidence even where she 'doesn't believe' ('because she [...] doesn't believe me'), right where this lack of belief, on her side, in his side, is in fact the system of belief that he, 'Jacques', aspires to more than anything. But even more astonishing, this 'first example' from the

anonymous dictionary has magically identified our protagonists, the masculine one, 'Jacques', alias Jacques Derrida, whose subjunctive living hardly surprises the feminine one, the pronoun 'her', 'la', in the position of the direct object, '*ne la surprenait guère*', clearly, in this context none other than the hardly surprised Hélène Cixous.

All very well, just another example of words and texts bending to Derrida's omnipotence of thought, or rather his thought bending to the omnipotent thought-poetry of words. And of dictionaries, even. It's true that Derrida doesn't say, in *H. C. for Life*, which dictionary he used. Maybe he considered it to be unimportant, insignificant. That said, he does employ the possessive pronoun or adjective 'my', *mon dictionnaire*, so it's probably not entirely indifferent. And in any case it would be interesting to know which dictionary Derrida considered to be 'his', given the extent to which his writing seems to have the dictionary constantly at its fingertips: Derrida's strongly 'etymological' relation to words and above all what I like to think of as his subordination of thinking to the dictionary, that is, to the book of homonyms, the 'arbitrary' agglutination of sometimes vigorously opposed signifieds under the rubric of a single signifier. What is Derrida's dictionary, after all?

Turns out it's not hard to find. In fact it's the first one I open, sure enough, there it is, in the *Petit Robert*, under '*Subjonctif*', p. 1701. Except that there's a hitch. The discrepancy between the cited and the citing of a single letter. A little *a* in the place of an *e*. That same Derridian difference once again, an *a* for an *e*. A microscopic, atomic typo, literal in the sense of a lone letter effaced and replaced. An almost imperceptible fault or falsification, a mini-forgery. And yet one that arguably changes everything. Because the citation does not in fact say 'That Jacques be alive did not surprise her much', but rather: 'That Jacques be alive did not surprise *him* much [*ne le surprenait guère*]'.<sup>20</sup> The *la* in Derrida's citation of the citation in the dictionary is in fact a *le* in the dictionary itself. Derrida's citational malpractice is a tiny fiction, of course, and a benediction. A 'countersignature', as Derrida calls reading, in the strong sense, several times in this book alone, when he insists that any reading worthy of the name must also (re)write what it reads, must add something of its own.<sup>21</sup> Or maybe it was an 'honest' mistake, the print is very small indeed, maybe he misread or projected unconsciously onto the text. We'll never know.

Either way, Derrida has *forged* the archive that he cites and re-writes. Read-writing his two protagonists into the *Petit Robert*, he has intervened not in the dreambook, but in the wordbook as if in language itself, the element of all Derrida's thinking and writing. The element of the element for each of these co-Narcissuses, these Echo-Narcissuses, let's say. By modifying a single elemental letter in the big 'little' book, Jacques Derrida has inscribed Hélène Cixous there, alongside himself. Where we'll always be able to find them, henceforth, if we know how to read. In the process of continuing.

## Bibliography

Cixous, Hélène. *Abstracts et Brèves Chroniques du temps II, Corollaires d'un vœu*. Paris: Galilée, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> *Le Petit Robert, Dictionnaire Alphabétique et Analogique de la Langue Française* (Paris: Société du Nouveau Littré, 1976), 1701. Emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> For example, *HC*, 104 [91], 143 [123] and *passim*. See also, among many others, Jacques Derrida, 'Countersignature', *Paragraph* 27 (2), 2004:7-42.

- Cixous, Hélène. *Dream I Tell You*. Translated by Beverley Bie Brahic. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. [*Rêve je te dis*. Paris: Galilée, 2003.]
- Derrida, Jacques. *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius*. Translated by Beverley Bie Brahic. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. [*Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie*. Paris: Galilée, 2003.]
- Derrida, Jacques. *H. C. for Life, That Is to Say....* Translated, with additional notes, by Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006. [*H. C. pour la vie, c'est à dire...* Paris: Galilée, 2002.]

### **Totul-este-bine-spus stând lângă mine în procesul de continuare. Jacques Derrida ca cititor scriitor-scriind al lui Hélène Cixous**

În căutarea unei măsuri comparative a importanței pe care Derrida o acordă diversilor scriitori pe care îi citește, s-ar putea face și mai rău dacă am număra cuvintele pe care le inventează și reinventează în onoarea lor. Desigur, aici campioana este Cixous. Și dincolo de numărarea de cuvinte, opera ei îl inspiră/ îi cere să producă o scriitură deosebit de subtilă, complexă și inventivă. Este, de asemenea, adevărat, și aceste două lucruri sunt ademenitor de dificil de dezlegat, că relația de lectură a lui Derrida cu opera lui Cixous este unică: nu numai că este el primul ei cititor, în multiple feluri, dar el este totodată în interior și în afară, deconstruind limitele dintre public și privat, publicat și nepublicat, fictiv și biografic, operă și viață. Acest eseu încearcă să deschidă noi perspective asupra acestor relații paradoxale, de exemplu prin reevaluarea problematicii „laturilor” așa cum sunt dezvoltate de Derrida: nu Cixous/Derrida ca viață/moarte, ci mai degrabă unul alături de celălalt în, prin și pentru viață.