

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

double oblivion of the ourang-outang by hélène cixous

WE LEAVE DOUBLE OBLIVION OF THE OURANG-OUTANG with a lasting image of the poet-thinker swiftly bundling the papers comprising the manuscript (it feels hardly that substantial) back into the cardboard box, setting it down by the front door, because the garbage truck is coming, it is Sunday morning, and she must be rid of it. It returned 172 pages earlier, gathered beneath the improbable heading *Le Prénom de Dieu*, an uncalculated find, a moment equally of good fortune and strange disquiet. Its disappearance is similarly left finally to the anonymous garbage collectors, out of her authorial hands, leaving so many potential points of departure.

—Writing in and around the manifold genres she critiques, Hélène Cixous is perhaps our most precious and irreplaceable thinker on modern literature, and, as she blends genres, forms, styles, subjects, pushing against and up against the fluid, nebulous borderlines of critical and literary convention, she is unquestionably one of its most enthralling experimentalists. A poet-thinker of the literary staging utterly fantastical outbreaks against institutionalised writerly convention, she submits a passionate, ferocious, meticulous critique of textual production and reception across all genres. Still no-one thinks and writes and critiques this strange institution called literature the way she does: she minutely dissects it by writing something pushing so hard up against the edges of the literary, touching up against whatever its other might be—criticism, theory, philosophy, etc.—and in this process generating something radically other-than-literature from within literature itself, flying-by-writing to interrogate foundational human questions about how we receive and construct meanings in text and in world.

—The manuscript could have been buried, or drowned, or burned—indeed, these are the options she contemplates for its destruction—but in the end it must just

disappear, given over instead to the accident and adestation of the garbage collection, akin perhaps, in a perverse, oblique way, to the postal service both revered and deconstructed by her good friend Jacques Derrida in his lacuna-filled novel-in-love-letters, *The Post Card* (1987). “Letters: feints”, she declared in one earlier novel (Cixous 2007, ix), describing in elegant shorthand the errant desires and destinies of the postcard it takes Derrida so long to not-explain, the frustrating series of strategic non-arrivals which defines his postal principle. Cixous, after Derrida, sees the vital significance of these feints, and errs at the destructive capacity of the archive that would be constituted by the delivery of the postcard, this archival memory-by-erasure, *mal d’archive*. This is a tale of remembering and forgetting, and forgetting that which has not yet happened, another chapter in the deeply personal, rigorously interrogative retelling of Marcel Proust’s monumental *À la recherche du temps perdu* which comprises her later trans-literary oeuvre: in the novels *Manhattan: Letters from Prehistory* (2007) and *Love Itself: In the Letterbox* (2008), in *Hyperdream* (2009), *So Close* (2010), *Hemlock* (2011), *Philippines* (2011), *Eve Escapes* (2012), and *Twists and Turns in the Heart’s Antarctic* (2013). Her first instinct is to incinerate the manuscript, these (love) letters from her past self, in the manner called for by Derrida: “Burn everything, forget everything” (Derrida 1987, 40), a great apocalyptic act of faith, leaving us with “the remainders of a recently destroyed correspondence” (3)—a psychotextual structural breakdown performed flawlessly in the composition and publication of the novel/not-novel *Double Oblivion of the Ourang-Outang*...

—There are no flames, no apocalypse, except metaphorically. There are tears though, so many tears—tears for her lost friend Derrida, for her dying mother, for the departed past self who sent forward this manuscript, for the death she must face that is her own. She is in her mid-seventies now, and mortality has preoccupied the poet-thinker so much lately, for so long, despite or perhaps because of Derrida’s declarations that she is for life, that is to say, on the side of life, and now living, surviving—this is the definition of life.

—When Cixous by chance discovers *Le Prénom de Dieu* (both a real and a fictional text: Cixous’s first published work was the novel *Le Prénom de Dieu* [1967]—but that is not the manuscript she discovers here), she departs on a detective story of sorts: she is provoked, by the discovery of this box from the past, containing this manuscript from over fifty years ago, to recall her haunting by so many literary-philosophical ghosts—Edgar Allen Poe of course, and also Ovid, Augustine, Stendhal, Proust, Rimbaud, Kafka, Joyce, Jeffers, and Derrida. She begins to piece together the story of her reading and writing life, in flashes and glimpses, the past erratically flowing back into the present, via this manuscript and the multitude of directions in which it points, thoughts bifurcating, endlessly wandering. The genre-bending of confessional memoir, literary criticism, and the detective story—plus the easy way high theory so

softly touches up against the pulp, performed in this personal confessional mode—is captivating, and moving. In comparison to the drama, sensation, and spectacle of Poe’s unlikely 1841 tale of ratiocination *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (from which the author takes her title), Cixous’s story is far more intimate, more touching, a textual moment of stunning beauty, suitably unplaceable and irreplaceable. The reader encounters a sustained stream-of-consciousness comprising reflections on creativity, dreams, memory, identity, motherhood, daughterhood, and the very ethics of reading and writing, but turning and returning always to themes of responsibility and death, keeping open the dialogue with her friend Derrida (and so many others too), erring on the side of life as if to speak to him his survival, *sur-vivre*, literally living-on.

—Aside from this hauntological return of the dead, this conjuring of ghosts, the reader also bears witness to a close study in creation, in generation and genealogy at once biological, existential, literary, and philosophical, in the material and theoretical production of text (then, as she wrote *Le Prénom de Dieu*, and now, as she writes *Double Oblivion of the Ourang-Outang*), fully engaged with exposing the distinction—first posited by Aristotle, and later recovered by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*, (1958)—between theory (Western philosophy has always been far too focussed on theory) and praxis (synonymous with action, the application of skill, the presentation and embodiment of theory), and then between praxis and poesis (creation and fabrication, production, a transformative “bringing-forth”). Indeed, the interplay between these three points of meaning-making, the inextricable blending of thought with action with production, will always be an appealing and engaging aspect of Cixous’s writing.

—But, for all its creative productive energies and enchanting critical engagements, it is death that sits at the heart of *Double Oblivion of the Ourang-Outang*. To read the unutterable first name of God, *Le Prénom de Dieu*, to name this Nameless Book, this Book-that-could-never-be-read, is to approach the double oblivion of the eponymous razorblade-wielding ourang-outang, the indiscriminate murderer of both mother and daughter in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. The ourang-outang lives beyond reason, beyond criminal transgression, on the side of passion and outside of the law. By performing this violent act, at the very origin of the detective story as a literary genre, the ourang-outang inadvertently presents M. Auguste C. Dupin with the perfect mystery, allowing him to display his immense inductive prowess—despite the incredulity of any reasonable reader when faced with this mad twist ending they cannot guess at themselves. Cixous’s autofictional retelling of this tale in *Double Oblivion of the Ourang-Outang* takes place in the singular moment, unseen in Poe’s narrative, when the two women, mother and daughter, are forced by chance to linger on the very edge of death. It is tinged with an irresistible melancholy as we witness

Cixous experience, *live*, the difficult appreciation of responsibility—that pre-originary origin of politics, friendship, being, *living*—as primarily the mediation of a relationship to brutal, unreasonable, unpredictable death. She remembers Derrida and so many other literary and philosophical influences now dead, often forgotten, potentially misremembered, but also watches the slow, protracted physical and mental decline of her mother (who presently reads a book about Ernest Shackleton, the narrative returning repeatedly to this point), and out of the corner of her eye glimpses in this her own death. Cixous acts the dual role of dutiful daughter to an ailing mother, and doting mother to a son and a daughter, and *Double Oblivion of the Ourang-Outang* could perhaps be above all a story about motherhood, so often coming back to Cixous’s thoughts and actions regarding her mother’s decline, and the author’s impending bereavement. It returns, always, to that singular moment forgotten in Poe’s tale, and the double oblivion of a bodily death and an archival death, these points of departure, functioning through this memory-by-erasure that no Mystic Writing Pad could overcome—look what has come from the preservation of *Le Prénom de Dieu*, the first name of God, transcendental Father-signified, nameless now, unspeakable, always already lost, a manuscript reduced by the archive to meaningless scribble-scrabbles even its author cannot now decipher...

—The tale ends before the garbage men arrive, suspending the reader in that infinite moment before the double oblivion of the ourang-outang.

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Biographical Note

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