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**The Personal Obligations of History Writing: Report on „Memory, The Body, and Life-Writing: A Conference with Hélène Cixous“, Northwestern University, September 1995.**

Hélène Cixous writes to us of what we must do in our writing: „One cannot not speak of the scandals of our epoch. One cannot not espouse a cause. One cannot not be summoned by an obligation of fidelity.“<sup>1</sup>

In one way or another, all the speakers contributing to „Memory, the Body, and Life Writing: A Conference with Hélène Cixous,“ reminded the listener of her obligations of fidelity we hold to our inner lives, our families, and our lives as teachers, scholars, feminists, and writers. As the varied apers attested, the necessity and difficulties of our obligations, both public and private, makes holding to them no easy task. The impossibility of divorcing one's supposedly objective activity as an historian or critic in the public sphere from the private goals and concerns which motivate our choices was, I felt, the underlying sub-text of all the talks the interdisciplinary and international audience heard over the two days.

Papers delivered on the first day of the conference concentrated upon issues centred directly upon the multi-facted work of Hélène Cixous. Mireille Calle-Gruber, from Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, and Cixous' co-author on *Photos de racine* (1994), began the first session with an intensely poetic commentary titled „Vision Over-taken by Wirting in Hélène Cixous's *La fiancée juive*.“ Published in 1995, the title of Cixous's book recalls Rembrandt's painting *The Jewish Bride* c. 1666 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Cixous calls Rembrandt one of the „voyagers of truth,“ a painter who rendered with the utmost fidelity the painting of an other person, letting himself go in the expression of tenderness, love for someone, human suffering.<sup>2</sup> Calle-Gruber re-evoked the impression of Rembrandt as she spoke of Cixous' book rewriting the erogenous foundation of writing through the inextricable association between vision and language. Such a process of writing and its result cannot but mean that the book answers

to the need to write life, which inevitably becomes, for Cixous, and for the authors she herself admires, a life of writing. The investment the self makes in the writing, was then reiterated by Tomothy Scheie discussing Cixous' play *L'Indiade „Performing Bodies, Dreams of the Self.“* A further, and most important, facet to the involvement of the self in writing was then articulated by Catherine McGillivray, an independent scholar and the translator of the recent Cixous poetic novel, *Manna for the Mandelstams for the Mandelas*. In her paper, „Translating Hélène Cixous's Book of Days“, McGillivray pointed to the transformation that occurs when an original text is rendered into a host language, particularly when it is from French, with its gendering of nouns, to the neutrality of English. As Cixous is an author who plays and manipulates with very specific intent the genders of her words, in addition to the levels of both undecidability and poe-ticity in her texts, the translators task is an arduous one which moves between the desire to remain literally faithful to the original, and to recreate the text entirely in its new language. In the end, writes McGillivray in her introduction to *Manna for the Mandelstams*, the receiving language is infused with „the blood of a new writing“ and as Cixous noted in her lecture, a new text is written which is equally powerful and magical.<sup>3</sup>

The following day saw three American feminist scholars give very different presentations of the causes, scandals, and obligations we live through and must act upon. Chris Froula, from Northwestern's English Department, gave a controversial talk entitled „Unnatural Histories: Self-Portraits as Censorship and Public Conscience“. Arguing that the self-portrait in art and literature acts as both self-analysis and social critique, in effect as a „screen for the cultural imaginary“ Froula surveyed a wide range of representations she designated as self-portraits, including the work of James Joyce, Cindy Sherman and Andre Serrano, but focused on Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World*, 1866 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and the installation and video work of Dorit Cypus.

For Froula, Courbet's *Origin of the World* has been subject to charges of pornography, not because of its blatant exposure of the female body, but because of what it reveals about the fraught construction of the male self. This masked „self-portrait“ expresses what should remain secret, the deep-seated male anxiety about women as the source of the world. As a talisman for her talk, Froula wished to wholistically redeem the critical value of this image, over and above its complex history of patronage, display, and reception. While admirable in its attempt to create a broad comment on the sexist function of representation, Froula's argument fundamentally neglected historical specificity and became increasingly fragmented, with the artworks ending up as simply illustrations for a now commonplace argument about the objectification of women.

The switch was made from Courbet to the late-twentieth century without even a nod to the huge changes occurring over this time in the politics of artmaking and reception, and the changing meanings in, for example, the nature of transgression. The second main focus of Froula's talk was the installation-video artworks titled *X-Ray* and *X-Ray Altered* by Dorit Cypus. *X-Ray* featured blown-up images of a female model hired by Cypus. However, these were replaced by images made of Cypus's own body (thus *X-Ray Altered*) because of a lawsuit from the model who claimed feeling invaded and exploited by the final installation. Seeking to answer „how can a woman allow herself to be looked at and still be in control?“ Froula appeared to argue that Cypus had been suc-

cessful in finally taking control of the gaze and forcing viewers to account for their own complicity in a sexed economy of visual pleasure. However, subsequent discussion revealed the moot nature of this question, revealed within the talk by the extent to which Froula herself became seduced by the power of her own retelling of Cypus's case and lapsed into uncritical narrative.

The recalling of an event both repressed and ever-present in the American historical memory was the aim of Alice Jardine, from Harvard University whose talk was titled „Live from the 1950s: The Rosenbergs and the Fate of Postmodernism.“ Recouping a social history which was no doubt foundational for her own political formation, Jardine argued that the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for spying on behalf of Communist Russia was the pivotal moment in American history. In the incredible invention of an entire story about people and politics, Jardine claimed for the Rosenberg trial the status of the initiatory moment of post-modernism, which then led to an unresolved and abiding breach in America's moral constitution.

Drawing ominous parallels between the fabrication of the Rosenberg's guilt by conservative power blocks in America, and the erosion of the private sphere which is a part of post-modern conservatism in the 1990s, Jardine ended her talk with a demand for academics to re-engage themselves in political and social life. While claiming to fight the hard fight against the postmodern foible of nostalgia, Jardine also betrayed a nostalgia of her own in her plea for the public sphere to be reclaimed by radical intellectuals. To what extent this forum for intellectuals to have sway over public policy has ever existed in the United States, and who has been responsible for losing it, remained unanswered. However, in unbidden response to the task Cixous has given us, Jardine expressed a necessary reminder that the responsibility to history, and to the politics of public life, is a commitment from which academics and intellectuals must not retreat.

A dramatic contrast in subject-matter was set by Nancy K. Miller from City University of New York in the next paper, titled „Memoirs and Mourning: Writing our Parents' Death,“ but the theme of obligation and fidelity was as powerful as before. In a very personal examination of her own experience of a parents death, Miller exposed the dialectic of betrayal and fidelity the memoir involves as the writer becomes increasingly enmeshed in the family plot. In the end, writing the life and death of the parent enables a life-writing for oneself (recalling Cixous's own important emergence into writing and her own self through the tragedy of her father's death), a liberating work of mourning and melancholy which forces and enables the individual to enact the forward-moving narrative of their life.

The presence of Hélène Cixous at the very lively and provoking round-table discussion afterwards was a reminder also of her keynote address delivered the previous evening, in which Cixous spoke about her own writing process in „Ecrire Aveugle/Writing Blinds/Blind Writing.“<sup>4</sup> In a long and beautiful elaborated prose-poem upon the intensely personal foundation of her writing and the means by which she achieves her text on the page, Cixous constantly evoked the conditions and experience of blindness, descent, foreignness, and the beyond to explain what it means to say and see what is secret, what is hidden in the visible, what only emerges in the dark of night. It is through an excavation of ourself said Cixous, that we find our origins, our past and our present in

words which we bring to the surface as the day breaks and the book is born. The book, for Cixous, thus puts into the world a theatre for oneself, where one can exist in a fragile state of belief that our existense is possible. To do this, chased out of Paradise as we are, is to stumble precipitously into the world, to emerge on the stage of history wherein we act.

- 1 Hélène Cixous, „From the scene of the unconscious to the scene of history,“ trans. Deborah W. Carpenter, in Ralph Cohen (ed.), *The Future of Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1989);
- 2 Cixous, „The Last Painting“, in Deborah Jensen (ed.), *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991): 115-131.
- 3 Catherine A. F. MacGillivray, „The Political Is – (and the) Poetical,“ Introduction to Hélène Cixous, *Manna for the Mandelstams for the Mandelas* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994): liv.
- 4 Hélène Cixous was Avalon Visiting Professor of the Humanities at Northwestern University, Fall 1995, and in France is based at the Université de Paris VIII et Collège.