

For-Giving Death: Cixous's *Osnabrück* and
Le Jour où je n'étais pas là

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"My mother will feed me to the grave" the writer-narrator of Hélène Cixous's *Osnabrück* good-humoredly says, evoking an extraordinary, if excessive, maternal generosity. The narrator leaves little room to doubt Mother Eve's proclivity for enthusiastic nourishing of her own; her giving nature is regularly manifested in offerings of string beans and chicken, mussels and celery root, pans of milk, plates of fish, strawberries, carrots, and cabbage. But beyond these motherly behaviors, Eve is a powerful, "unsinkable," and life-driving force whose example, as the quote also intimates, will feed the narrator's writing for a lifetime. Given Cixous's characterization of this maternal figure, it is difficult not to draw parallels between the ever-giving Eve and the prototype of feminine generosity described in "Laugh of the Medusa":

She doesn't "know" what she's giving, she doesn't measure it; she gives, though, neither a counterfeit impression nor something she hasn't got. She gives more, with no assurance that she'll get back even some unexpected profit from what she puts out. She gives that there may be life, thought, transformation. (893)

As readers of Cixous's early and seminal essays will recall, her theory of "feminine" generosity was put forth as an alternative to the practice of giving in a patriarchal economy.¹ Disinterested giving, she contends in "Castration and Decapitation," is never practiced under the auspices of patriarchy:

Everything must return to the masculine. "Return": the economy is founded on a system of returns. If a man spends and is spent, it's on condition that his power returns. If a man should go out to the other, it's always done according to the Hegelian model, the model of the master-slave dialectic. (50)

In such an exchange, the giver asserts and consolidates power by binding others to himself and vitiating the power of others to his own advantage. A gift always implies debt and deficiency for the recipient. As Alan Schrift points out in a recent comparative analysis of Nietzsche and Cixous, debt and guilt are conceptually linked and even linguistically linked in German (*Schuld* = debt; *schuldig* = guilty), connotations particularly transparent for Cixous, whose mother tongue is German.² A gift to another bestows social obligation, personal deficit, and even moral shortfall. We might take cross-linguistic associations a step further, as did Marcel Mauss in his classic anthropological study of the gift: "*Gift*" is "poison" in German, and reminds us of the lethal nature of giving.³ As Cixous sees it, the patriarchal economy degenerates into a struggle to keep debt, guilt, and even death on the other's side. In clear opposition, "Laugh" spurns death and diminishment, touts the "exchange that multiplies" and opens uncounted spaces for others to occupy "between the other me where one is always infinitely more than one and more than me" (263, 264). The essay projects nothing less than exponential gains to be had all around in this alternate economy.

To suggest that Cixous has merely reified her earlier theoretical projections in the maternal character of Eve, however, is to slight the complexity of her writing and to miss the refinements to her thought over the last twenty-five years. Most certainly, Cixous still finds relationships to the other a continued focus of her thought—and one can hear echoes of the alternate economy in her description in a mid-nineties interview of the rappings of reciprocity with the other:

The other in all his or her forms gives me *I*. It is on the occasion of the other that *I* catch sight of *me*; or that *I* catch *me* at: reacting, choosing, refusing, accepting. It is the other who makes my portrait. . . . The other of all sorts is also of all diverse richness. The more the other is rich, the more I am rich. (*Rootprints* 13)⁴

Still, Cixous moves away perceptibly from the untempered optimism of the seventies. She returns to the vexing questions: how does one acknowledge otherness and accept it as the rich, diverse gift it can be without appropriating and diminishing the other, without inadvertently causing the other's death? Can there possibly be an exchange that respects otherness? Or is the other's death—or one's own—always implied in the gift? The observation about mother's liberality leading up to the tomb is, in this perspective, only half facetious.

At least some of the terrain of Cixous's more recent reflections on giving to others has been prepared by Jacques Derrida, about whom Cixous has said, "I have infinite thinking freedom with [him]" (*Rootprints* 80). One particular essay of his, "The Time of the King," discusses the gift in a way that sharpens the problems and defines the ambiguities that interest Cixous. Derrida reasons, "for there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt. If the other *gives me back* or *owes me* or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift" (128). In the event of a gift, the recipient cannot even go so far as to "*recognize the gift as gift*," (129) lest s/he put in motion the whole dynamic of returns. Derrida sums up by saying: "if there is no gift, there is no gift, but if there is gift held or beheld as gift by the other, once again there is no gift" (130). The only condition under which a real gift exchanged equitably and disinterestedly between others could be made is if there were an absolute forgetting of the gift, not a repression as the author cautions, but "a forgetting that also absolves, that unbinds absolutely and infinitely more, therefore, than excuse, forgiveness, or acquittal" (132). Having posited the gift on its own forgetting, Derrida situates true giving virtually outside the limits of experience and knowledge. For the purposes of my essay, I am isolating this definition from the philosopher's development of arguments that allow him to extrapolate from the theory of the gift the relation between thinking and knowing.

Somewhere short of these absolute, philosophical terms, Cixous re-thinks and re-writes the nature of generous exchange with the other. Two recent fictions, *Osnabrück* (1999) and *Le Jour*

où je n'étais pas là (*The Day I Wasn't T(her)e*) (2000) ponder the dilemmas of gifts and debts to others. A back-to-back reading of the two narratives makes salient some interesting modifications to Cixous's thought on the nature of giving. In *Osnabrück*, an otherwise admirable model of generosity is put in question for ignoring the debts and death that dog even the most generous relationships with the other. Extending this understanding, *Le Jour* presents death and debt as non-negotiable givens and obliges us to conceive of a kind of generosity predicated simultaneously on death and on the forgetting of death. As I hope to demonstrate, Cixous eventually suggests that the relation with the other is better sustained in acts of forgiving than in acts of giving.

Osnabrück amplifies the image, frequently but briefly glimpsed in other fictions, of the generous woman, personified in the book as the narrator-writer's mother, Eve. Eve appears as the benevolent kitchen crone, remarkable for her irrepressible liberality and her life-sustaining drive. She deploys abundance as easily and almost as effortlessly as she takes breath. Even beyond the home, the mother displays generosity without calculation or judgment: "Elle ne pense pas, ne calcule pas. Donne la vie sans intention de donner" 'She doesn't think, doesn't calculate. Gives life without intending to give' (O 63). Like the archetypal woman of "Laugh," she gives without transfer of loss, without diminishment. Broadly outlined, one of the problems that the narrator of the book faces is how to respond in kind to the mother's example, how to write about this best-loved other with the same generous acceptance she has modeled.

Certainly Eve's "bonté flottante" 'floating goodness' suggests the openness and open-handedness toward others that Cixous dreams of elsewhere; Eve is "sans charité, sans compassion sans pitié, elle ne s'identifie à personne" 'without charity, without compassion without pity, she identifies herself with no one' (O 63). At the same time that Eve feels unbound to others, she refuses to pass judgment on or find fault with others. This German Jewish immigrant living in French Algeria asserts that she accepts what she finds. When, for example, Eve catches her housekeeper pilfering money, she decides against speaking out ("je n'ai rien dit"

'I said nothing' [O 113]), let alone blaming the woman. Eve's generosity extends to a moratorium on guilt or failing or debt. On principle, she eschews the economy of give-and-take, of obligations accrued and discharged, of circulating debt. Even her modest self-judgment—in a passage named "the confession of my mother"—corroborates a practice of non-competition. Eve states simply that she has neither stolen nor coveted nor been afflicted with the ambition to "crush others" (O 105). Her concept of relationship with others is all of a piece: she refrains from entering into the unequal bonds with others of obligation, of domination, or of subservience.

As ideal as all of this may sound, Cixous's text introduces thoughtful critique of the mother's apparently irreproachable position. If Eve refuses to acknowledge debt, she also refuses any articulations of difference as well. Being oblivious to difference endangers the sovereign status of the other as surely as does harnessing others in inequitable relationships. Cixous demonstrates this reverse side to Eve's unselfconscious giving and her boundless availability in any of a number of domestic events between the narrator and her mother. For example, the narrator describes with gentle humor Eve's unannounced insinuations into her (the narrator's) apartment to make meals or do housework. The writer requests unsuccessfully that the mother ring the doorbell to announce her arrival so as to be welcomed "de l'autre côté du monde" 'from the other side of the world' and thus acknowledged and celebrated as other ("tu serais reconnue, tu reconnaîtrais" 'you would be recognized, would recognize' [O 83]). The mother's obstinate refusal to distinguish her presence, to confirm her otherness from her daughter is consistent with Eve's denial of any (other) affiliations and thus any recognition of others' status. (She fails to identify herself with other Jews, other Germans, other women, other widows, etc.) Taken to its extreme, the inability to recognize or assert differences becomes a failure to relate to the other as not the same—or even to relate the other.⁵ Serious consequences ensue for the writer, beginning with herself. She says of her mother that Eve neither congratulated nor scolded her for her behavior, a characteristic abstention on Eve's part, but that leads

the narrator to the following conclusion: "ma maman ne me conte pas" 'my mother doesn't narrate me' (O 170). Eve's model of generosity disassociates itself from the possibility of a kind of writing that discerns and distinguishes the other. The narrator can truly say "entre elle et écrire il y a incompatibilité" 'between her and writing there is incompatibility' (O 48) if by writing she means the attempt to think a relationship that simultaneously takes nothing from the other *and also* recognizes the other. Giving the gift without return that Eve has perfected is somewhat compromised by her inability to acknowledge some essential, inappropriable non-sameness. In this respect, Eve's otherwise remarkable example doesn't fully analogize the generosity, the generous thinking, and the generous writing that Cixous seeks.

Perhaps the clearest rift between the mother and the writer (not to mention between early "theory" and subsequent "praxis") is on the issue of (the other's) death. "Laugh" boldly lays out a position: "wherever history still unfolds as the history of death, she [the generous woman] does not tread" (893). I interpret Cixous to mean that real giving finds itself in a refusal to participate in the history of the survival of a few at the expense of many. Certainly in her relentless campaign to sustain life wherever she sees it Eve seems to adhere to this principle. In some highly symbolic ways, Eve turns the family history away from one of endless loss to one of uncountable gains. When obliged to earn the family's livelihood, Eve transforms her deceased husband's TB clinic for the dying into a maternity clinic whose sole *raison d'être* is to bring humans into the world. She studiously ignores death both professionally and personally, despite being herself immersed in a history of untimely and unjust deaths: her father's, her husband's, her grandson's, her friends and relatives lost in the Holocaust. Says the narrator: "Selon elle cela ne sert à rien de parler mort après la mort" 'according to her there's no point in speaking of death after death' (O 55). But in not acknowledging death, Eve doesn't manage to avoid participation in a history of death. Quite to the contrary, she seems to become complicit in that history when, for example, she survives the Algerian conflict by paying no notice to widespread and horrific death caused by

violent clashes of difference. On a literal level, indifference to the other's death translates into a worrisome negligence of the plight of others. On a symbolic level, indifference to death dissolves all remaining trace of the other and otherness and obviates any possibility of relation—relation with the other being, of course, the ultimate purpose of the generous gift. The question for the writer must be how excluding death or its histories can ever entirely acknowledge (that is, maintain an appropriate relation with) others.

Osnabrück poses the question inversely as well. Can there be a generous writing, a writing that recognizes and celebrates the other and gives her sacred space without incurring some debt, indeed, without incurring some death? Even the narrator's attempts to write about her generous generatrix get snarled in this dilemma. The narrator has chosen the mother as the subject of her writing precisely because she feels keenly that Eve has long been the most beloved other to whom she has been the least generous and whose otherness she has least honored in writing. But writing about mother risks the same fatal consequences as not writing about her:

Mais ne pas écrire maman . . . c'est tuer maman dans l'oeuf, c'est la cacher sous le lit de papa sous la tombe, écrire sur elle c'est marcher sur son corps pendant qu'elle dort . . . mais ne pas écrire sur elle c'est l'oublier exprès sous une feuille de papier.

But not to write mama . . . is to kill mama in the womb, to hide her under papa's bed under his tombstone, to write on her is to walk over her body as she sleeps . . . but not to write on her is to forget her on purpose under a sheet of paper. (O 161)

The narrator can't choose to give no death (or to owe no debt). Her writing can't be generous in the way her mother seems to be generous, disregarding finality and seeing only continuity.

Writing in a way that recognizes the other, recognizes the other's differences, recognizes the other's fragile presence is a conscious gift to the other—and like all conscious gifts presented to the other, some cost is inevitably involved, some form of death inevitably implied. Cixous acknowledges this trade-off when, in

the book, her narrator imagines repeatedly and anxiously Eve's absences from the writer, Eve's remoteness, real and projected, her defined and untouchable otherness even from the other (her daughter) to whom she is most intimately connected. Armed with the certitude that her own generosity will have deadly effects, the narrator attempts to defer the gifts she feels she owes her mother. In the end, she offers her mother a *virtual* gift: the promise of a trip to Eve's birthplace, Osnabrück, where "ses morts s'apprêtaient à venir à notre rencontre" 'her dead and her deaths prepared to meet us' (O 230). As to her writing, the narrator claims to postpone writing the book about Eve, as though to discount *Osnabrück's* status as a gift that has already incurred some deadly debts. But if *Osnabrück* brings home poignantly the Derridean premise that "if there is a gift, there is no gift," it also lays the new groundwork of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* in which exchanges take place and deadly gifts already given are forgiven.

Le Jour, published less than a year after *Osnabrück*, takes another look at the mother's generosity. The book hovers around questions of giving (away), giving back, and taking (away), and in so doing returns to the term *faute* or "fault," accurately translatable as both responsibility and failing, a more subtle version of debt. The "story" goes briefly like this: some forty years after the fact, the narrator "remembers" how she gave her baby boy, a Down's syndrome child with a serious heart condition, to her mother for adoption. The book follows the narrator's attempts to get back from her mother the story of the child and particularly of his premature death in her absence and in the custody of the mother. Even so brief a summary should raise the questions of who "owes" whom and who might have been at fault. Guilt certainly seems to frame the narrator's ambivalent search for her son's story: an imagined opening scene has the narrator furtively burying the "souvenir d'une faute" 'memory of a fault' (J 9). But as close as the narrator seems to be to an admission of guilt, she ends this preface by disclaiming personal responsibility, saying of this fault, "ce n'est pas la mienne" 'it's not mine' (J 9). This declaration combined with the ambiguous gesture of obviously burying a memory opens up several lines of inquiry in the narrative: what

is the fault? whose fault is it? and has the fault really been forgotten?

Cixous's text plays with this concept of "fautif" by etymological association with "défaut," defect or imperfection. From early on, an abandoned three-legged dog wanders in and out of the narrative. Its imperfections, like some serious crime, make it susceptible to abandonment and destruction (indeed, the mother asserts forcefully: "il faut l'abbbattre" 'it should be kkkkilled' [J 24]). But the narrator also recognizes that its defects make the dog all the more canine, as though its very lacks constitute an essence. The text openly encourages analogies between the imperfect dog and the "imperfect" child, Georges. His lagging development, unfinished heart, and condensed lifespan highlight the frailties associated with the human condition, as though he were more essentially human. The narrator takes this one step further: if the child represents some universal aspect of his species by his incompleteness, he simultaneously represents otherness from his species. He has other-racial characteristics in the bosom of a family whose station in life, by genetic and cultural heritage, is that of the officially sanctioned other. He is both related to and isolated from them. His perfect otherness is further reflected in his relationships with others. By the grandmother's testimony, the child makes no demands on others and yet is "attachant" for all those who come in contact with him. The child's wordless practice of otherness suggests a perfect innocence, a complete lack of meanness or harm to all others, indeed, a totally engaging love of all others rather than a culpable failure. Presumably for this reason the narrator calls the child "le héros de la famille" 'the hero of the family,' her "saint simple" 'simple saint' and "l'instructeur de ma foi" 'the instructor of my faith' (J 65). Georges combines radical otherness with the radical practice of generosity that Cixous would wish to embrace.

Were the child's "défauts" the only faults in the book, one could argue that Cixous has staged a return to the optimism of "Laugh": an idealized conception of otherness founded upon the inevitable lacks that make each of us uniquely other combined with an idealized conception of unmeasured and cost-free gen-

erosity among others. As much as this appears to be at the heart of the book (even at the heart of some secular faith whose principles, modeled by little Georges, can be practiced), other “fautes” occupy the author’s writing. The child’s generosity is not so much at issue as is the grandmother’s, and for once there appears to be a distinct lack of generosity on her part. First, there is Eve’s failure to give (back) the story of Georges and his final moments—something that seems vaguely to be owed to the narrator. Second (and related to the withholding of Georges’s story), there is Eve’s failure to give the baby life-saving medicine, which has fatal consequences. All-giving Eve appears to be doubly at fault if not downright guilty.

As Cixous arranges the narrative, Eve does confess a fault and its attendant guilt, although the guilt on first encounter seems oddly displaced. She reports to her daughter on several occasions of her remorse over her mother’s (Omi) death decades after Georges’s short life and rapid demise. In unprompted testimony, Eve dwells on Omi’s long and painful ordeal with death. She recalls repeatedly that Omi instructed her to give her death when it seemed time: “Donne-moi quelque chose et ne me le dis pas” ‘Give me something and don’t tell me’ (J 78). However, Eve fails to administer this last gift of death for fear that it might be motivated by the desire to relieve herself of the burden of her mother’s cumbersome existence. In short, she fears the gift that is given for what it can return to the giver. Paradoxically, though motivated out of profound respect and love for the other, Eve does nothing to stop Omi’s final suffering. By withholding “quelque chose” (the poisonous gift), Eve ultimately does irreparable harm, is no longer innocent, has, by failure to give, committed a *faute* against her most beloved other.

By this reasoning, the mother’s conduct around Georges’s death some decades earlier avoided that failure. Eve doesn’t impose herself, her will, or her gift (medicine, in this case). Her explicit non-gift to Georges nevertheless has the virtue of being a gift—for the baby dies peacefully within hours of Eve’s decision and is thus spared the slow and certain deterioration dictated by his malformed heart. The narrator understands this gesture as

being as much about life as about death: "Ce qu'elle n'a jamais dit concernant la mort de Georges et la mort d'Omi, ou plutôt ce qu'elle a toujours dissimulé d'une mort par l'autre, ou plutôt concernant la vie dans la mort" "What she never said concerning George's death and Omi's death, or rather what she always concealed of one death by the other, or rather concerning life in death" (J 175). If Eve has buried the memory of Georges's death beneath that of Omi's, it doesn't constitute a deliberate evasion of self-incrimination of the baby's death. Rather, the story of Omi's death explicitly reveals Eve's failure to honor life and hence to honor otherness—something she achieves in the case of Georges. In short, she exposes almost obsessively the one transgression otherwise concealed by her great generosity.

In the very last pages, when the narrator discovers her mother's role in Georges's final illness, she maintains the distinction between the mother's repeated gesture to withhold from her loved ones: in Omi's case, Eve is "l'auteur d'une lacheté" 'the author of an act of cowardice' (J 189) whereas in Georges's case, she is "héroïque" (J 175), that is, unusually unsparing of self. The mother merits this epithet for having given up the generous gifts of the baby—his unconditional love and undemanding lovability—to avoid the physical pain life would eventually cost him. Equally important to the narrator, the mother gives up, or more accurately never gives at all, the story of her heroic sacrifice—made moreover in the daughter's stead. We can infer that Eve fails to give the story to her daughter because it would in its turn become a gift reinstating the cycle of debt with the daughter and thus given for self-aggrandizement. The mother's equally heroic gesture lies in her claims in the end to have forgotten the events of the child's death, or at least to have forgotten her critical part, her "gift" to her grandson.

By the logic of gift economy, forgetting one's gifts leads directly to forgetting others' debts created by those gifts. From there the span is short between forgetting others' debts and that other kind of giving we call forgiving, the other kind of *don* (gift) that we name *pardon*. Technically speaking, there is no gift in forgiving other than the gesture to obliterate the debt, to overlook the

shortfall, to put an end to the cycle of exchange without once again giving. In this conception of forgiveness, not only is the debt forgotten, but the gift that incurs the other's debt is forgotten as well. The narrator cites and re-cites Omi's words, writing them as though they were the book's mantra, "donne-moi quelque chose et ne me le dis pas": let there be a gift, but let it be given unbeknownst to the receiver and unacknowledged by the giver, a generous forgiving that annuls all debts, that honors the other *sans accuser*, without accusing or distinguishing either donor or recipient.

"Donne-moi" may have originally been Omi's request, but Cixous uses it to define the subtle, tacit transactions between Eve and her daughter as well. Eve gives her daughter stories that should not be told, and the daughter understands that Eve does so without "wishing to wish" that they be told. One might imagine her unspoken and indirect directive to read as follows: " 'Don't tell me' that you have written these stories but 'give' them anyway. Sustain the exchange that sustains relationships without having recourse to the dehumanizing bonds of debt. I, in turn, release you unknowingly from the obligation to give." The narrator's writing of Eve's stories (unread, of course, by her mother) has the potential to honor her mother's unformulated request.

What is more, the stories or "secrets" about her clinic (stories that Eve insists she is giving her daughter-writer not to give) demonstrate Eve's practice of forgiveness:

Toutes ces femmes qui sont accusées d'enfant, de non-enfant, d'enfant pas comme ceci pas comme cela, toutes ces coupables par définition . . . qui défilent dans le parloir où ma mère tantôt ferme les yeux tantôt ouvre les yeux et toutes nous sécrétons des ruses et des silences ça tisse sans cesse de modestes petites toiles pour tenter de camoufler les indices des crimes qu'elles n'ont pas commis.

All these women accused of children, of non-children, of children not like this or that, all these guilty by definition . . . who parade through the parlor where my mother sometimes closes her eyes sometimes opens her eyes and we all secrete ruses and silences it incessantly weaves modest little cloths to try to disguise the evidence of crimes they haven't committed. (*J* 142)

Eve consciously overlooks (that is, with eyes both open and shut) the arbitrary measures of defect and debt and the punitive remedies they imply. The unspoken and unseen purpose of her concerted inattention is to overturn judgments and strike down “death sentences”—in short, to maneuver consciously to preserve life. Eve offers to this assortment of falsely accused women the generous recognition of a common humanity in a momentary community—the briefly glimpsed “nous” that seems to include the narrator and perhaps even herself among the so-called guilty. Like the women who come to the clinic falsely accused of all manner of failing, Georges is, in that outside “economy” of debits and credits, measured and found wanting. Within his grandmother’s clinic, these defects become arbitrary and without significance. Even Georges’s death can be read in the context of the clinic since his grandmother keeps him from the cruel and dehumanizing death that awaits him over the long term. The critical elements of an act of forgiveness become salient in these examples: the active un-knowing of “faute” or failure and the respectful acknowledgment of humanness as opposed to the offensive fault or even the generosity of the reprieve.

Cixous chooses to feature in the book’s final moments two gestures that very much resemble forgiveness as defined above, that is, the conscious forgetting of debts. In the first instance the narrator says of her dead child: “J’ouvre les mains. On ne reprend pas l’enfant qu’on a donné” ‘I open my hands. You can’t take back the child you’ve given away’ (190). Whether debt is incurred in the giving or taking of the child is ambiguous and immaterial. More certainly, the narrator arrests the circle of debt in order to restore ties to her mother and brother. In the second instance (in fact, the book’s last sentence), the writer figuratively lets close the door of her mother’s clinic in Algeria, thereby letting go the secret stories of transgression, her own included, in order to get on with life. Closing the book in this fashion suggests fairly clearly that the initial question of *faute* has been declared moot, the memory of *faute* scrupulously—in all senses of the word—buried. But even the initial image of burial can lend connotations to Cixous’s concept of “forgiving”: less a commitment to oblivion than a sign of respect for what is human.

In this sense, to conclude by overlooking death/debt in the very notion of forgiveness would be to miss a critical difference in the “pardon” that Cixous explores in this book. Although in its archaic sense, “pardon” does mean to forfeit what is owed (and in capital cases this means, of course, to forget the death set as the penalty), Cixous’s formula of forgiveness, “donne-moi quelque chose et ne me le dis pas,” doesn’t entirely annul death. “Give me something,” “finish me off” it says “and don’t tell me.” Not “I will forgive the death (yours) that you owe me” but rather “I will forgive the death (mine) that you give me.” Debt and death split in the second formulation: debt disappears; death does not. As debt is removed, Cixous can re-balance the equation: neither party would dominate in this giving and forgiving of death. After all, the “giver” would also be at fault were it not for the anticipatory amnesty that pre-empts debt and guilt. And the “recipient” of this death, would hold the double status of being beholden and aggrieved, had she chosen to know in advance. The power of death that remains between these two parties is meaningful not for punishment or self-aggrandizement (in other words, the reduction of one to an other) but as an equilibrating concession to the other.

In the final analysis, we have the narrator’s writing to thank that this idiosyncratic version of forgiveness that “forgets” itself in the act—“donne-moi quelque chose et ne me le dis pas” ‘give me something and don’t tell me’—is nevertheless not entirely forgotten. By virtue of putting the words of pre-emptive forgiveness first in Omi’s mouth, then Eve’s, then her own, the narrator traces this “generous” maternal history of mutual forgiveness that can’t quite forget the “history of death.” In this particular history, Cixous redefines the gift (*don*) as the death—both power over the other and failing toward the other—that stands between humans. The *pardon* that she also articulates is not a gift or even an anti-gift but rather a recognition of that fragile life-and-death relation between one and her other. To give more or to know more would be to reengage in giving death. Ironically, the writer of *Le Jour* can’t succeed in giving or receiving a full pardon any more than she could succeed in giving a death-less gift (her mother never entirely recognizes what takes place between herself and her

daughter). Nevertheless the writing that Cixous freely gives to her readers comes as close as one might dare to imagining a humanly possible practice of generosity toward others.

Notes

1 I would like to keep in mind that Cixous eschewed an essentialist position even in these early writings. As the author cautions more than once, “we have to be careful not to lapse smugly or blindly into an essentialist ideological interpretation” (NBW 81). I will keep the qualifiers “masculine” and “feminine” in quotations to make apparent Cixous’s challenges to those over-simplified designations. “Patriarchal” names more accurately the practices to which Cixous imagines alternatives.

2 Schriff’s essay helpfully links Nietzsche’s concept of a society certain enough of its power to be able to disregard debts and Cixous’s concept of a “feminine libidinal” economy in which giving is never associated with diminishment.

3 Mauss says “the danger represented by the thing given or transmitted is possibly nowhere better expressed than in very ancient Germanic languages. This explains the double meaning of the word *Gift* as gift and poison” (61-62).

4 The “other” in academic discourse, particularly since post-colonial studies, has been weighted with the sense of those who are disenfranchised from the dominant or colonizing culture. Cixous has often thought in these specific terms. *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage*, for example, relates the narrator’s youth in French Algeria and endows the term “other” with those precise connotations. Just as often—and such is mostly the case in the works considered here—the Cixousian writer refers to the other as simply the one who is not me, although that neat distinction is undone even in the quote given here. Attridge’s statement about the other always being in relation may prove useful here:

If the other is always and only other *to me*, I am already in some kind of relation to it, and this means that it participates with me in some general, shared framework. Otherness, that is, is produced in an active or event-like relation—we might call it a *relat-*

ing: the other as other to is always and constitutively on the point of turning from the unknown into the known, from the other into the same. (22)

5 Kamuf offers a reading of an event that Cixous writes about and that, for one split second, enacts a desirable encounter with the other. Cixous describes how Franz Kafka bowed to a blind man to whom he was being presented. The other man knew he had been thus recognized because Kafka's hair had lightly grazed his face in the course of this show of respect. Kamuf interprets:

[The bow] is a general address, and the respect it signifies is a function of this generality. It addresses the other as, in effect, the same as all those to whom one owes respect, regardless of any and all difference. More precisely, it acknowledges the other as other than him- or herself, as more than or greater than a contingent, finite self, and finally, it addresses its respect to no one in particular, but to a concept of the other as that to which respect is owed. (82)

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