Derrida & Cixous: Between and Beyond, or “what to the letter has happened”

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One could, by way of opening, paraphrase [soufflées] by Hélène Cixous to the painter Simon Hantai, a “character” in her book Le Tablier de Simon Hantai (Simon Hantai’s Apron), to whom she lends her words (one only has to substitute “philosophy” for “painting”): “What is painting?—he says—What is writing?” These questions are inseparable, these halves are related, it worries me a lot, says he. / The commerce of writing with painting, the exchange, the double angel at the top of the ladder and which still needs to be outmatched.” These questions are inseparable indeed, these halves, literature (rather writing) and philosophy (rather thought), are related as it has never been seen before, never been read, between a philosopher and a writer: I am of course talking about the exchanges that flow between Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous, between their works in the first place, but also through elective affinities which partake of an unyielding friendship, of commitments, of a whole story and some affects which color what occurs here between them with such a rare, not to say unique intensity amongst the annals of alliances between literature and philosophy. And at once it is not so simple to decide on which side the one and the other meet, Derrida being

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declared by Cixous not only “the inventor of différence” but “the poet who makes writing and hearing—and what an extraordinary sense of hearing he has—pair up and dance,”3 and Cixous inscribed by Derrida “in this great lineage of prophetic poets” “as the only woman, in this nighttime genealogy,” worthy to take a place by the side of “Homer, Milton, Nietzsche, Joyce, Borges” (SO 51). These two proper names, names of capital Philosophy and Literature (dare I say, quoting the title of one of Cixous’s latest fictions, as our Promised Towers?), are thus each of them, although in a different way, there, in the between, in the place of crossing, in the place of transition, of translation between the one and the other, in the play of difference without which there is neither the one nor the other. Must I recall what these two philosophical writers, these poetical philosophers have in common, and which legacies divide them? If Cixous recognizes, and Derrida does not miss the opportunity to insist on it also (even their disagreements are almost in agreement), that “Each of us is a stranger otherwise” (étranger autrement),4 that there is between them “a matter of blood lost and of tongue regained” and that “it remains a well-kept secret, between French-Jews-from-Algeria,”5 these words “French,” “Jews,” “from Algeria” point out without a doubt the three marks inscribed à vif as their “noblewounds” (noblessures), to use again Cixous’s word, which keep them for ever separated together in their divided and multiplied disidentifications and (non-)belongings. Many differences imprint folds onto their “life,” but both of them keep in common, above all, the living memory of the blows and wounds inflicted by anti-Semitism and Pétain’s régime imposed in Algeria from 1940, resulting in violent expulsions for both. “What gathers together our dissimilarities is a thematized experience of the inside of outside,”6 she says, relating this experience to clandestine life, to secret passages, mazes, and othercrypts which, alone, ensure from now on the survival of those who have been wounded at birth in their “identity.” They have in common, therefore, a series of gaps, decenterings, expulsions, which will have forever cut them off from any community, from any belonging, “even if it were precisely Jewish,” as Derrida will write.7 And the question of circumcision, the first indelible mark inscribed on bare skin as the seal of connection with the community, is not, as we know, the least of these stigmata, which are noted by Cixous in Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint:

If we don’t have circumcision in common . . . —at least that of the penis, for the other that of the heart, I too have known—the Circumcision to which Jacques Derrida has given its letters patent of noblewound, we do mirror a number of precise stigmata, dated Algiers 1867, 1870, Oran 1940, 1942, 1956, all those dates of passovers, transfers, expulsions, naturalizations, de-citizenships,
exinclusions, blacklistings, doors slammed in your face, dates of wars, of colonization, incorporation, assimilation, assimilation, indigene/ni/ations that constitute the archives of what he calls “my nostalgeria” and that I call my “algeriance,” dates and plaques, my doctor father’s nameplate yanked off [dévisé] the wall by Vichy, the psychic rash of plaques at the evocation of nationalist-racist outbreaks, tremors and symptoms at the portals of Schools. (PJD 5)

Need I recall these life tropes (biographèmes), these facts, these dates, all this “proof” and this artefactuality duly archived, and even well known, almost too well known, made strangely familiar since they both started telling some snatches of it and started giving themselves an account of their legend? To tell the truth, in fact or in reality as they would say, letting resonate in those words the homonymy which already undermines any certainty in these idiomatic expressions while aiming precisely to ensure it, the beginning is always other, it is forever starting again, not unlike the experience of those in analysis who start over and over again on the couch what they think is the true tale of their “origins.” As Cixous writes, “As we know what is feigned at the beginning ends up becoming true,” and again, about the painting Peinture (Écriture rose), she rightly points out that the Book or the Painting “would have no author, he would follow he would start again round and round” (T 20). Indeed, if one thinks about it, what will one ever know of the “biographical” in their case, since they never stop undermining this belief, this naive credulity in the capacity of being able to appropriate such a thing as “my life”? One would also do well to recall Derrida’s warning regarding the necessity of a “new problematic of the biographical in general and of the biography of philosophers in particular,” which must “mobilize other resources, including, at the very least, a new analysis of the proper name and of the signature,” not to mention the infinitely more worrisome questioning as to the border between the “work” and “life,” to “the virtual and mobile power [puissance]” of this border or limit, and to the concept of life itself and of the living which enables the creation of such wordings. If “my life” remains for them the form itself of the secret, what is then, in fact, a fact for them? How can one pretend to give an account of this questioning when their whole work, on both sides, has forced us to reevaluate “all these matters, that is to say, the biographical and the autos of the autobiographical” (O 5)? Hence, probably, the compulsion which always pushes us to validate this “proof”: yes, they were really born there, have been through here, declared this and that, long enough to reassure ourselves for a brief moment and to regain “our theoretical certainties about identity and what we think we know about a proper name” (O 10). But we also know perfectly well that “One
will never be able to prove that it happened, but only swear that it did” and that “Perjury must remain possible” (SO 83–84).

Since they first met about forty years ago, a most singular intellectual friendship has formed between them, and they have time and time again testified to this event of reading arising between these works of thought which, though mustering different resources, modalities, and devices of writing, have probed, each in their own way, all the limits “between the public and the private, the fictive and the real, the phantasmatic and the effective” (HC 18) so as to stand precisely on the thread of this crossing line. These interactions have taken many shapes, and, above all, have constantly intensified and gathered pace since the colloquium “Lectures de la différence sexuelle” (Readings of Sexual Difference) held at the Collège international de philosophie in 1990, which inaugurated a series of readings by each of them of the other. Many texts have followed in turn, sometimes even “simultaneously” as was the case in 2003 with the publication of Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie by Derrida and Rêve je te dis and L’amour du loup et autres remords by Cixous, giving a different kind of impact, as rare as original, to these interactions. Moreover one should pay careful attention to these phenomena (if the word is still pertinent in this context) of “coincidences” or simultaneity which have nothing to do with synchronization or calculated time between them, and which often imbue their textual relationships with a temporality close to the one of the unconscious, the differed action and the contretemps, where any present time is disjoined from itself. And this disjunction of the point de rencontre, where the meeting occurs punctually but also where there is “no” meeting at all—point de rencontre in French connects these three senses at least: the punctum, the negative, and the sublime at the same time—arrives both in their texts and between them, in reality and virtually (and this reality is no less virtual for being real)—and this, again, is not the least of events taking place between and beyond them.

Several effects of countersignature arise between these two œuvres that have been constantly chasing each other these past few years. Particularly since the publication of Voiles (Veils) in 1998, where, for the first time, their texts were gathered under a common title that sheltered them as a tent or a wedding tallith, junctions between their texts have increased in several series that have produced more and more intersections. To mention, on the side of Derrida, “Fourmis” (1990), “Un ver à soie” (“A Silkworm of One’s Own”) (1996), H. C. pour la vie, c’est à dire . . . (H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . .) (1998), Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie (2003), amongst the most explicit convening works—for without a doubt there are many others more encrypted. On the side of Cixous, “Savoir” plays an unprecedented role serving as
substrate, as framework, or better yet as *subjectile* to the reading interwoven by Derrida in “A Silkworm of One’s Own,” which constitutes the exemplary scene of blind textual interreading where, as René Major notes, a vertiginous event hovering between knowledge and non-knowledge is taking place, Derrida seeing for the first time, after thirty-three years of friendship, that “he had not seen until then that she could not see him looking at her.” Yet, in addition to “Savoir,” a whole constellation of texts is deployed, revealing a careful dialogue with Derrida’s work, if not with “him,” in “person” (through the delegated or differed figure of a character—but it is precisely this question which is worked through in those narratives: how can we differentiate truth from fiction, the model from the simulacrum, if the copy of the *mimesis* is originary?), a dialogue which goes from allusion to oblique answer (it would not be false to say that the *Primal Scenes ([Scènes primitives]*) from *Rêveries de la femme sauvage* [Reveries of the Wild Woman] [2000] are the matching piece, the “poetical response” to the impossible autobiographical essay of Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other* [1996]), to the analytical and extensive interpretative commentary, as is the case in *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*, next to which one should place “Ce corps étranjuif” and “Vols d’aveugle autour d’une libétrie,” two texts which are both in-depth, ramified readings of “Circumfession.” Derrida also makes several “apparitions” as a figure or a character in Cixous’s fictions, furtively passing through various “fictional lines” according to the title of the collection, *Lignes fictives*, in which these works of Cixous are published. This is the case of *Le jour où je n’étais pas là* (The Day I Wasn’t There) (2000), where the mother listens to a radio program on France Culture which mentions “Derrida’s Travels”; of “Vues sur ma terre,” where the narrator rewrites the “real childhood memory” recounted in “A Silkworm of One’s Own” and makes it her “own” (“A week ago, on Sunday morning, I pulled the trick of the worm [ver] on myself. It is the word “dream” [rêve] read backwards [envers] . . .”), of “Fichus et caleçons,” which weaves the threads of the dream opened up to reading by Derrida in *Fichus* of *Tours promises*, which opens with the scene of the keynote conference pronounced by Derrida at the colloquium *Genèses Généalogies Genres: Autour de l’œuvre d’Hélène Cixous,* which (really) took place at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in May 2003; of *Rêve je te dis*, in which one can find an unsettling oneirographical account concerning “him,” or at least bearing his proper name “Jacques Derrida” . . . And those are only a few of the “ reversibilities” (rêversibilités) and translations occurring between these works and which let us dream already as to the infinite limits of this “Nous nous écrivons” (we write ourselves/each other) which occurs as an event between them, the importance of which Derrida underlines here
as such (even if this “as such” is precisely what can never be pinned down between them):

everything we write, she and I, remains strictly autobiographical, as they say. We only ever write ourselves, on ourselves. Nous nous écrivons. . . . this indecision between two homonyms is not a game. It is so serious that it remains undecidable for me. An absolute difference which can come back to the same around here [par ici]. . . . It is the truth: there are cases when, when two write, one no longer knows whether they write (to) each other or themselves [s’ils écrivent ou s’ils écrivent], and whether a lot covers all or part of the homonymy.

(HC 175)

Earlier than “Fourmis,” there were no doubt other scenes of reading in which these textual “relations” between œuvres that “read,” better yet, “elect” each other, as Cixous expresses it, were deployed, but precisely, they were perhaps not offered so explicitly to be read, in all their overexposed visibility, their “obviousness” (évidence) (but “Who is dreaming in all this obviousness [évidence]?” [HC 136], asks Derrida), as is the case in these crossroads where the uninterrupted dialogue intensifies and accelerates so much that their works become “almost” inseparable (“we have probably never been apart. It is as if we had almost [quasiment] never been apart” HC 5). For reasons of space, and because I have developed elsewhere the counterpart of this “in-between-those-two” (entre-eux-deux), I have chosen to consider here only the figure of Derrida as a reader of Cixous and I will concentrate my study in the next few pages on only one of the four major texts he devoted to Cixous’s œuvre: H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . . , a sweeping textual crossing through which he inaugurates, in a never-ending beginning, his own reading of this work, which he manages all the same to keep intact though not untouched, in an amazing tour de force, “anxious not to cut while cutting out” (HC 81) Cixous’s texts, as he himself puts it. Each of the four texts19 Derrida devoted to Cixous’s work are not only boundless because of the philosophical and theoretical impact regarding the various issues they broach but also because of their affective and autoheterobiographical impact, since the fold or the exact point of the fold (pliure), their “binding” point, obliges the reader to read from now on these two opus one inside the other, “If one takes seriously, as it seems to me one must” (HC 34), these declarations reiterated by Derrida on the topic of his “mémoires,” a word which he maintains here in all its genders:20 one indeed reads in the “Prière d’insérer” of Voiles that, “So foreign to each other they might seem, so autonomous the one and the other, these two texts have at least one feature in common: through sexual difference, they come under one same genre/gender. One recog-
nizes in them effectively, unquestionably and right through, these literary genres: autobiography, confession or mémories. But the future [l’avenir] is also a part of it.” And in the “Prière d’insérer” of H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . ., this: “One could also read H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . . as mémories. At least as a part greater than itself, a bar without measure, rather a score, but sensitive and decisive, of the mémories of the author, Jacques Derrida.” These declarations should singularly complicate the analysis of the “complicities” that can be read in these exchanges, which “share without dividing, and do not let themselves be separated.”21

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H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . .: the life-pool of the live-ance, or what “makes the letter arrive before the letter”

while recalling, meditating, trying to understand, within myself [à part moi], what has been happening [arrivée] here, ever since that encounter, if it has happened, what to the letter has happened. While trying to think here [par ici] what may well have happened and happened to me in the wake of the story of this post-card about letters on literature and what followed from that. Would I ever be capable of it? And worthy? (HC 8)

Always more to read, that is the “toute-puissance,” “overpowering power” of Derrida’s reading in H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . .: saying this immediately implies that it is impossible to pretend to cover (faire le tour) this vertiginous text in only a few pages, for it broaches the most serious philosophical issues—the one of life and death—these issues always taken furthermore at the letter of the event of Cixous’s poetical writing. Incidentally, Peggy Kamuf rightly points out that this particular text of Derrida has not received all the attention that it requires and one might be surprised by this lack of interest, given the high content of the specifically philosophical (and moreover psychoanalytical) issues which are queried therein,22 and the coherence of this “thought of ‘puissance’” in attendance in Derrida’s writings since “Force and Signification” (1963):
It’s as if thirty-five years later (1963–1998) a reflection on the writing of Cixous led finally to a thinking of “puissance” that, not only phenomenology and philosophy had never supplied, but that even his own shake-down readings (solicitations) of so many other poets (Mallarmé, Jabès, Artaud, Genet, Blanchot, Kafka, Celan, etc.) had not yet come upon. The long essay puts forward the thinking of puissance in a radically new grammar that would derive its powerless power from the subjunctive mood of “puisse.”

_H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . . _is certainly one the most powerful texts of Derrida about literature and about what he will call in _Genéses, généalogies, genres et le génie, _using again Cixous’s term in _Manhattan, _the “other-omnipotence” (Toute-puissance-autre) of the letter. There are few texts where the question of literary fiction will have been raised with such acuity and strength by a philosopher. The reflection engaged in this text (and in others these past few years) in regards to the notion of “as if,” to name only this notion, this indispensable lever for fiction taking up again the Kantian “als ob” that Derrida has reexamined, particularly with regards to the impact and potentiality left in a virtual state (en puissance) by this concept, gives rise in _H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . . , _and always on the subject of Cixous’s œuvre, to numerous questions as disturbing as they are provocative in relation to all the notions (“facts,” reality, the effective and the phantasmatic, simulacra and truth, etc.) which are conventionally used for circumscribing the limits of literary fiction. It is certainly not a coincidence if Cixous’s œuvre is the one, more than any other literary work, Derrida elects here again to ponder all these questions going “between literature and its other, fiction, the possible, the real and the impossible” (HC 32) and to query what becomes of “A fictional or simulated interrogation” when it is not reduced to a “rhetorical question” but, on the contrary, when it is taken seriously as the (unconditional) condition by which one enters literature. There are in this text several complex issues which I cannot begin to size up here, but perhaps I could at least suggest that, as Cixous’s œuvre has freed Derrida from the limits traditionally recognized by philosophy, Derrida intends, on his side, not to pay her back in her own currency (which, according to his own unmeasured measure, would not be giving anything at all), but to relaunch these limits by raising the stakes, in other words to free Cixous’s work from literature itself, which can at times reduce its scope or capacity:

If one takes seriously, as it seems to me one must, the canonical question of the poetics of literary genres in the case of this work, I would be tempted, and I’ll come back to this later, time permitting, to question all these categories, and in particular, that of fiction. Although all these texts are transfixed with fiction, and with fiction to the nth power, the fictional element does not dominate, in the
last instance, more than anything else does, whether it be called narrative, novelistic, dramatic, autobiographical. Her poetics runs through all that at the same time and something else. Her fictional hyperrealism poses to the classification of modes and genres the most formidable, the most unheard-of and the most interesting problems. (HC 34, my emphasis)

This gesture of enfranchisement, through which Derrida un-enclaves (even if an enclave were really the lodging of a space possible, or rather impossible to conceive in its very depths), un-harnesses or releases (désamortit) the potential puissance24 of Cixous’s writing, seems to me absolutely essential, and if this gesture was itself present, on the sidelines, in all of Derrida’s previous readings, it finds here its most forceful affirmation as he recognizes—recognizing while avoiding too much recognition, according to the hyperbolic logic of over(de)negation and hyperbole that he follows here—the working itself of her writing, as one “which, although literary through and through, also goes beyond literature, just as it goes beyond autobiography. And my hypothesis will be that the excess and surplus of this passage precisely passes through life, a word which becomes all the more obscure” (HC 12). The recognition of (reconnaissance de) Cixous’s œuvre, but also the gratitude towards her (reconnaissance à), hence, is joined in H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . . with the most powerful (puissante) question, the one of life, here less than ever opposed to death, as one knows for Derrida as for Cixous, and this, even though the difference of opinion which persists between them in a never-ending way (we had already seen a first formulation of this difference in relation to dreams in “Fourmis,” but perhaps it is still this question of the dream which comes back again and again, if the dream is itself the “omnipotence” of thought which disregards the partition between life and death),25 finds here its most potent articulation: “Where does this strange difference of opinion come from, this never-ending ‘argument’ between Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous, at the heart of their agreement, as to what death has in store at the bottom of life itself, before the end? How can one of them, she, stand on the side of life, whereas the other, he, feels sucked towards the side of death?”26

For, while caring about both sides of this story, 27 Derrida is perhaps also agreeing with his friend, bowing to her opinion without going to her side (and certainly without siding with her since this would mean sacrificing the possibility of her coming, of seeing her coming), when, pushing to the limit this “unilaterality” of a unique side, of the quick of life for life (but of a life which, obscurely, never ignores in itself the power of a “living of death”), he questions by this side of “living life” (HC 95) what philosophy has never been able (pu) to know (it is a question of
pouvoir, of mastery, more than one of puissance), on the subject of “life” and “death,” especially when they are treated, as is often the case, as antonyms. Derrida will again confide to a parenthesis this difference of opinion which has never been settled, as to life, to this “for-life” which would no longer be thought of as the other side of the Heideggerian “being-for-death”: “in the philosophical gigantomachia, from Plato to Descartes, from Nietzsche to Husserl, Bergson and Heidegger, among others, the only big question whose stakes remain undecided would be to know whether it is necessary to think being [l’être] before life, entity [l’étant] before the living [le vivant] or the reverse” (HC 103). Thanks to Cixous, to what the word “life” “fornames” (pournonne) in her work in a grammar which changes, replaces, and substitutes each word of this proposition “C’est pour la vie,” Derrida is able to move forward, with a step to the side in relation to this whole tradition, not so much to remind us, as he is always displacing the accent in this most mobile phrasing of/on life, that “a certain indecomposable ‘being-for’ would be more originary than anything else, the absolute origin of meaning” (which would never be enough to do justice to “life”), but rather that “before the being-for, and even the being-of-life-for, there would be the life-for-life, the for-life which at once gives and replaces life with life in view of life. And this is why, up to the end, ‘for life’ has no end, it knows no end” (HC 104). It is then the “differential power of finite life over life which stays alive, keeps itself alive, comes back to life” (HC 95) which Derrida wants to safeguard, with Cixous: life “for life” not as a vow of immortality or eternity, but in the sense of “life in life,”28 of what, before the being and especially Heidegger’s being-for-death, keeps life “spared [sauvé] and thus pardoned [graciée] . . . , in its finite moment of life, [and which] deserves to be called immortality or eternity, in the grace of the finite instant; and it is probably this appellation of life which we are and shall still be enchanted by, an appellation of life which knows equally neither death nor immortality, namely eternity outside time. Everything takes place on the instant” (HC 96). The word “life”—“the most common word there is” (HC 103), notices Derrida—receives here a new, “original,” unheard-of name which changes in one moment—the question of speed (vitesse) is crucial here, indeed—what we always thought we recognized under the name of life: it is a matter here of thinking “life in life (a life which is no more death than the opposite of death, a life which does not know death)” (HC 96), which is ignorant of it, one might say, neither knowing it nor learning anything from it (living is not learning to die), while all the same not being ignorant of it (life neither avoids nor is unaware of death).

What Derrida advances here on the side of philosophy (and far from taking “ant steps,”29 he rather takes giant or genius steps, stepping over
in one stroke centuries of thought on a question as old, but also as new and as yet unborn, as life itself), he does not neglect doing also on the side of psychoanalysis by drawing on the source of a Belebtheit, of a livingness (vivance) of the being-in-life—what he calls “the liveliness [vivement] of being-in-life,” and he does not hesitate, like his friend the poet, to create a noun from an adverb—, of a “reviviscence of life,” then, which “would be the element, the only one, a universal element since it has no limits or no other side: there is no side for non-life” (HC 132). In this originary Belebtheit, Derrida sees a power (puissance) which remains a potentiality (en puissance) in Freudian thought, but without Freud being able to say—unlike the experience put to work in the work and in life, in Hélène Cixous’s work of life, which never stops signing in itself the always living experience of this “revival” (ravivement)30—“what this universal Belebtheit— which is not yet culturally determined as an animism, which, unlike animism, is not yet about to become, or is not already, a religion of the dead in their surviving ghosts—can be, will have been, could have been, potentially [en puissance]; a Belebtheit of which we can say nothing by anthropological, culturalist or ethnological experience, and which is not even a philosophical doctrine . . . but a quasi-originary Belebtheit which must, if not present itself, at least announce itself to some pre-empirical or pre-positive experience” (HC 133).

A pre-empirical experience of life: here again, one will have recognized the Derridean philosophical gesture par excellence, which consists in cutting a path, in giving precedence and antecedence to something which opens and forces its way through, making experience possible even before it becomes apparent in any form, and even “without a necessary need for visibility” (HC 99): a life from before life, in a way a life in advance and out front (par en avant), which anticipates and goes forward, before any “originary” thought about “life.” In other words, there has to be life before life, for life to take place and become apparent. Or else, to make heard this “vital” proposition in its own grammar: one only needs to say, or think without even saying it, to call with all one’s wishes (de tous ses vœux), “may life be able to [que la vie puisse],” and already this “puisse” can and is. . . . The “puisse” always goes beyond the ontological “it is,” the “puisse” prevails as a potentiality (en puissance) over ontology.

Moreover, the important question about puissance in this text is not only a philosophical theme which would finally receive its formalization, like the speed (vitesse) to which it is closely related and which has not yet, no more than life, been conceptualized; it is and it does much more, beginning with the way it puts itself to the test or enacts in Derrida’s reading, which adopts here significantly the form of a renewal. Reiter-
ated with an apology for the patience requested at every cut/reopen- ing of the reading, the very idea of beginning, or of origin, is precisely what is deferred throughout this text, which writes itself in the intervals of countless re-beginnings: “I shall always have to begin again. As I shall explain, there would even be a kind or genre of palinode about these re-
beginnings, these reversions and retractions” (HC 1). Here again, what is at stake is not only a banal strategy of reading but the very logic of life, or of the “miracle” that he intends to pursue here: no reading could ever have the power (puissance) to measure itself against the excessiveness of the ōuvre, every reading can then only fail and exhaust its own strength, but in this very exhaustion it still draws (in an auto-immune way?) enough power to re-initiate itself and start afresh, and then—each time replanted in another beginning where it is a matter, according to the paradox of the absolutely unheard-of which nonetheless repeats itself, of “reread[ing] . . . at last for the first time” (HC 178)—reading actually takes place in effect. In other words, everything happens as if—this locution takes on here a life of its own, exerting itself an exponential power of meaning—the reading of Cixous’s ōuvre were itself given to read as miracles, as scenes where “this impossible faith in the impos-
ible” would be involved in a “would that I could [il faudrait que je puisse]” which would really have the capacity to make happen what it believes in: “Then one could only believe in miracles. And to believe would be the miracle, the magical power [puissance] of the miracle. The miracle would be the ordinary of belief” (HC 4). This is precisely what is happening throughout this strange reading, multiplying retrospective loops and parentheses which interrupt any chrono-logic of the work, a reading in which Derrida declares being rather willing to paralyze himself “on the threshold,” “dar[ing] neither knock nor ring the bell, as if he were waiting in front of the door for it to slightly open by itself. It is as if it were to open by itself miraculously” he says (HC 1). And like Celan’s poem to which he is obliquely referring here, when Celan says in “The Meridian” that the poem “speaks,” that it speaks or/ by itself, the door opens and allows, by being ajar, a glimpse of the event of writing, of the work’s power (puissance), in the brand new sense that these words, “event” and “puissance,” will take here by attempting to do justice to the C of her name (“What is this? [Qu’est-ce que c’est?] But also, what is this C? Who is it? Who is C?” [HC 9–10]):

What is this word, might [puissance]? What would this word, all fresh and new-
minted, maybe yet unheard-of, be? Whence would it thus come, unrecognizable, a homonym only to itself? . . . . Whence would this yet unknown word might come, whose resurrection I would like to dedicate to her [Cixous], first by giving it back to her, for it is her own, newly minted? Like the very event whose mighty
power is always might—which makes something come, come about, happen or arrive. (HC 24)

One will have noticed that, here again, everything is set up from a word which came from her, a word he borrowed only to give it back to her, for she is the only one who will have been able to detect in it a sleeping power that she will have woken, and thus who will have enabled the revival of a whole other power (puissance), of a might beyond power, a weak or powerless power which would have nothing to do with the power of force (Macht), always compromising with its double, violence. This power of powerlessness of puise proceeds from the absolute speed which, likewise, does not have to be formalized in an experience before “making” or “pro-duced” itself: like the powerlessness which is no more on this side the opposite of power (“it is impotence itself which makes the impossible and which becomes omnipotent” [HC 89]), the infinite speed about which Derrida is talking goes “so much faster than speed that it is no longer speed but only the homonymy of speed, which therefore can just as well go very slowly” (HC 89).

But what about literature, the letter, fiction in all this, one will ask: have we lost sight of them? Well, on the contrary, they are precisely at the core of this “new logic of the phantasm and of the event,” of the unheard-of performative power of “what happens or arrives with the phantasm” (HC 91). For the letter—the letter taken literally (à la lettre) in the sense that, precisely, one will never be able to understand such an expression: “what has à la lettre happened” (what has happened to the letter: what has the letter become? where has it gone, is it lost, etc.? or what happened literally: in reality, in fact, in effect; the wording is undecidably wavering, literally, between two letters)—is par excellence the powerless-omnipotent place to think this poetics of the event. Is the letter arriving, or isn’t it arriving? One would have to be very clever to be able to follow it in these sentences, apparently contradictory, where Derrida turns it, like another “Purloined Letter,” inside out, in every direction. For example, this passage: “The string of lines I am going to cut out would deserve centuries of reading and I shall return to this place later when I speak of the impossible, namely of the letter which does not manage to arrive [n’arrive pas à arriver], and of an impossible which is no longer the opposite of the possible, of might [puissance], of an impossible which is no longer on the other side of the possible” (HC 48–49, my emphasis); whereas one reads, in this other passage, nonetheless as true as the previous one: “this thought of the soul, of the psyche, the pneuma, of life or of animal breath, is nothing but this enacted thought [pensée en acte] of might, namely of absolute speed which makes the letter arrive before the letter” (HC 99, my emphasis). On one
side, the letter does not manage to arrive; on the other, the letter arrives before the letter. What is this saying? (Qu’est-ce à dire?) How can we understand this (apparent) contradiction? and is it one? or are we dealing, precisely, in the interval which parts these two wordings, with a thought about time which gets ahead of itself (se prend de vitesse)? And wouldn’t it be this beat of time, allowing two such different propositions, which are nonetheless both true, to remain on the thread of an aporia (as for life and death which, the one and the other, arrive and do not manage to arrive, do not manage to arrive to themselves), which better gives us to think this tension of life, its relation to the quick of life? This could always take the appearance of a contradictory logic, if not a tautology; this would be the gesture of a sleepwalking reader, walking without knowing it on a very fine thread stretched over an abyss, for the relation between these two propositions—“not managing to arrive” and “arriving before arriving”—is the driving force of this thought of puissance, captured in the very impotence of language.

Moreover, unlike Lacan, who assumed, by postulating the indivisibility of the letter and the fact that according to him it always reaches its destination, its fate or destiny, Derrida, while coming back to this ancient dispute (“Then, of course, as has often been said, a letter can also not arrive, it is always possible. But this then means that the mighty power of the ‘puisse’ has not arrived to itself,” as he adds. “It will not have been mighty enough. Lively enough, and therefore fast enough” [HC 89]), also makes one more step in H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . . , thanks to Cixous. For, effectively, while it is true that Derrida contradicted Lacan in noting that a letter can always not arrive at its destination, and thus defer indefinitely through its destinarrence its address (making any return to the sender and any teleological programming fail), he does not only come back retrospectively to this issue in H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . . , but develops the argument deployed in The Postcard perhaps in a more radical way, by showing, leaning on Cixous’s fictions, that a letter can also thwart (déjouer) its address by remaining still, overtaking the letter (prenant la lettre de vitesse), surprising itself, going faster than time:

The address outsends the letter, but the letter outsends time, it goes faster than time, if one may say so and if one can make this impossible thing happen or arrive: to outsend time, to go faster than speed itself, to outspeed speed, thus to overtake space and time, to pass or “double” [doubler] space and time, as one says about passing a vehicle in French. (HC 76)

A letter thus can win “in speed and on speed” (gagner “de vitesse et sur la vitesse”), it is gained and gains, “gained as it reaches or gains [en gagnant] the address, as one ‘gains’ a place, in French, when one arrives
there” (HC 76), but one could as rightly say—and truth, here also, like for life and death, is said twice, doubly, in the contradiction—that it never arrives, thus leading to this “extraordinary dissociation,” Derrida notes, “between the thought of fate [destin] or even of destiny, and, on the other hand, the very idea of destination” (HC 77). Hence it is sufficient, he says, and he does not omit doing it by saying it (here, Derrida is also taking on silently an old debate with John Searle), that “I might really, mightily [puissamment], say ‘would that the letter might arrive [puisse la lettre arriver]’ [and even without saying it, pronouncing it, uttering it: ‘The “might” [[puisse]] may be silent, it may remain as a pre-verbal trace and still do what it does not utter’” (HC 76)] and the letter is already here [là], around here [par ici], around there [par là] even, has somehow arrived: without delay, without causing me delay. For just as I am/follow [suis] the address, I am/follow the letter addressed to me” (HC 86). Resorting to the letter, to the letter of and in literature in Cixous’s work, proves then not to be marginal at all: the letter bears, carries along and is carried by, the puissance of life, it gives to think this puissance in this wholly other relationship of puissance-impuissance. And, as Peggy Kamuf also notes, it is obvious that H. C. for Life occupies in Derrida’s philosophical work a fundamental position if he deposes, as it is clearly the case in this whole reading of Cixous’s œuvre, the quick of the relation to life (and to death) in the letter (and even more, we will see very soon, as this letter addressed to her). Indeed, it is thus clear that Cixous’s writing and the question of an ever-running life are intimately intertwined, and that, as Kamuf aptly remarks, “By dissolving the boundaries of ‘writing,’ Derrida raised the status considerably for thinking about literature, poetry, fiction in relation to anything and everything else, i.e. to ‘life.’ Or rather, not in relation to but as life or as a surviving, super-living force.”

Life, speed, puissance, the letter: the main part of the poetics of the event described in H. C. for Life probably lies in this inscription—which is the supremely inventive poetical countersignature of Cixous’s fictions—applied not only onto the body of language, but incised in the mark, the trace (pre-verbal or not) left in “the very body of the given language, its semantics and its grammar” (HC 89), as Derrida himself predicts it for him and for her while he is discovering, while he is uncovering in the bosom of this French language another grammar, as it is the case of his “decisional invention” (HC 89) for the subjunctive mode, the mode of virtual potentiality per se on which he confers, with Cixous, an effectivity or a performativity without precedence. Carrying on regardless of normality and of grammatical rules which had never seen in this subjunctive anything else than a “modality of a verbal tense among others” (HC 84), Derrida unties and sets this subjunctive free of
any submission or subjugation to a commanding order, be it the one of the sentence or of the syntax: this originary subjunctive Derrida invokes (more than he evokes it) in all of this sweeping reading produces another “puis" which is not a ‘secondary semantic determination of the verb and the noun ‘pouvoir’ . . . ‘Puissé’ on the contrary is the quasi-derivable trace which one must presuppose so that the other agencies . . . might, precisely, appear” (HC 84–85).

Finally (but how can one ever finish with the reading of a text which itself never stops starting anew?), I would like to come back to one of the heteroautothanaobiographical aspects which are at stake each time in such a troubling way, in the Derridean countersignatures of Cixous’s texts. In spite of Derrida’s numerous (over[de]negational?) assertions in which he denies talking about himself while talking about her, otherwise than “within myself”25 (HC 15), H. C. for Life does not sidestep, far from it, this effect of signature. One knows how much Derrida’s reading, here as everywhere else (but perhaps here more than everywhere else, because of the breadth of the path he cuts), is always extremely attentive to all the echoes of Cixous’s signifiers; it is particularly the case of the final “ment,” this atomic particle present in the words “element” and “event” (événement), that he analyzes meticulously in its literality as the most elementary example of a work each part of which is “greater than the whole, that is, mightier than the element which comprises it” (HC 28). I wonder if one could not say the same, while thinking about all we have discussed on the subject of the infinite puissance of life again, for the example Derrida says he “fell” upon when he was prowling, “[as he was] preparing for this session, . . . around the relationships between subjunctivity and subjectivity, these two moods or modes of subjugation, subjection and subordination” (HC 124). This is how he describes this scene in the context, one must not forget, of the demonstration he gives about the omnipotence of the subjunctive:

Provoked into interesting myself in this subjunctive modality in a way I had never done before, I wished to be quite clear in my own mind: 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. First example: ‘That Jacques be alive did not surprise her much’ (Roger Martin du Gard).” (HC 124)

The example, one can sense it—and perhaps still more now that he who wrote these lines in 1998 has since crossed the threshold between life and death—is not trivial, since it engages his name (his first name), and, above all, it happens outside any intentionality, outside any will from the author. Furthermore, the sentence itself—“That Jacques be alive did not surprise her much”—not only raises again, in a surprising fashion, the
question of life and perhaps of a possible-impossible survival (whereas everybody perhaps thought Jacques had perished, “she” would be the only one to believe he is alive, truly living on the quick of life), but the surprise introduced by this example—taken from the dictionary, drawn on the most conventional, not to say normed, literature—is still greater, since the main clause to which the subjunctive subordinate is related designates a “she” who believes in the impossible, in life stronger than death, in life for life, a “she” who could correspond to a friend of this Jacques, the one of the “example” and his double, the one who overtakes (qui le double) or who is overtaken (qui se fait doubler) by him, J. D. She whom he addresses here obliquely, in this apparently banal or overdetermined example (overdetermined as all that we think we find “by chance,” whereas it is the “thing” that comes and finds “us” by indicating to “us” that it is there, by calling us by our name for example, as is the case here) where “he,” Jacques Derrida, has nothing to do with it, nothing direct at any rate, but where he might always be in substitution, or in replacement, fictively or potentially, virtually, could as well be “she,” the friend, in fiction or in reality, who will always believe in the impossible, “That Jacques be alive,” and who will make the impossible happen by believing in it.

Everything would happen then as if, in “life” like in this text, Derrida was accomplishing the homonymic feat (adresse) of which he had described the workings in minute detail throughout H. C. for Life in theoretical and philosophical terms. Everything happens as if, with this note (billet), he was saying—diagonally or on the side, sidestepping (biaisant) naturally on her side, cutting on the bias or to the cross in a roundabout way, blindly and silently surrendering to the all-mighty confidence of this “she,” she who believed in Jacques’s life “à la vie à la mort,” 34 (to recall an expression which has taken on a whole other meaning in Derrida’s thought and writing since his death); everything happens as if he was indeed, in fact and in truth, saying this unbelievable thing, then, in his lifetime and for life, life beyond life: “Que Jacques puisse être vivant” ([Would] that Jacques should/could be alive), “Que Jacques puisse” ([Would] that Jacques should [be able to]). A few lines earlier in the text (have we really understood the wide-ranging scope of this so economical, elliptical formula? will we ever be able to understand “mightier” enough?), he had written in black and white: “For ‘might [puisse]’ is the absolute performative” (HC 124). Would this not be, then, the exemplary test of the proposition he is trying out here, in the fullest sense of the word, asserting with a stunning force that “The subjunctive is mightier, from the subordinate clause, than the ontological main clause,” and that “the apparently subordinated might of the subjunctive was potentially mightier [en puissance plus puissante], from
a performative point of view, than that of the present indicative of the verb, therefore of the constative” (HC 124)? How will we, on our side, ever be quite clear in “our own mind,” or in our heart, on the meaning of this “puisse”? Whom and what is Derrida talking about in this example where, while he is not talking about himself except “within me” as promised, he is yet talking also about himself through the literary letter of a sentence which has apparently no connection with him? How, again, could we be quite clear to grasp what is happening in this deferred letter, when he predicts earlier in the text, always ahead of us, the confusion sowed in our mind by the homonymic feat of this sentence which seems more, much more, than just an example found “by chance,” as we say (in effect he is even foreseeing that “Only an affection, the affective part of an event can remind it [the phantasmatical mighty power of the performative] of its limit” [HC 124]). And if the phantasmatical, performative puissance of this note, this “short letter” sent to himself on the pretext of borrowing an example from someone else, was taking place here and now, in this subjunctive (“That Jacques be alive”) infinitely more potent than the main clause? And if Jacques, “within me,” was actually saying in full, literally and believing in it, that he believed in the impossible, in what “takes place at the very moment” of this reported quotation, of this strange diversion of fiction, and that his friend, the “she” who was never surprised by anything on the side of life where she was standing and keeping him in life, would consider him alive (le tenir pour vivant), on this side as on the other? If such a life line—an evernew way of thinking a “ligne de vie”—could open, and I think it can and it does, it would give a still more unbelievable twist to the situation than what we thought we glimpsed about the puissance of the countersignature happening between Jacques Derrida and Héléne Cixous. In fiction and in “life,” as we say. One will never know “what has been happening [arrivée] here,” “if it has happened, what to the letter has happened” (HC8), at this very point of the text, but as the “Jacques” of the example and as the other Jacques, one can only believe in the impossible. This faith in the impossible is reaffirmed in the excipit of the text, while he is answering in extremis Cixous’s sentence, “We are not going to die,” thus countersigning at the end and up to the end, her “side,” standing up for her: “I just cannot believe her, that is to say: I can only manage to believe her, I only manage to believe her, when she speaks in the subjunctive” (HC 181). From negativity, to an expletive turn of phrase, to a conditional affirmation, but on only one condition which is itself unconditional: the succession of sentences makes heard in the acceleration, the puissance of the event which, through the displacement / replacement of the beats of the sentence “which gives place on receiving the place [qui donne lieu en recevant le lieu], in opening, in
letting the place open itself” (HC 88), the “taking place” which is happening and which makes effectively the event happen—while saving it from the arrival (which always carries with itself a death arrest). Henceforth, the reading of this “example,” of this part, more powerful (puissante) than the whole and where the power (puissance) of the subjunctive touches on his name, acting performatively, is not, in effect, without consequences, and this very performativity resists any reduction (amortissement).

Derrida brings us to think straight away, “without causing me delay” (HC 96) he said, without waiting, the absolute impatience of his desire which would like to make this letter arrive (and it arrives even before the sentence finishes or holds together grammatically), the “mighty impatience of the wish,” of this vow concerning “him” and not concerning him, undecidedly, “Of the wish even before will [vouloir] and power [pouvoir] which it gives nevertheless. The wish comes before everything, it lives before everything, before knowing [savoir], having [avoir], being able [pouvoir], even wanting [vouloir]. As you are about to see [voir]. Literally” (HC 74). He makes this saying inherited from so-called popular wisdom, il ne croit pas si bien dire (he does not believe he speaks so well/he does not realize the truth of what he says), say something else altogether; he himself only believes in that other saying (ce dire), in saying oneself (se dire) (whatever the meaning of this reflexivity may be, and therein lies the whole problem): this is what remains infinitely to be said—and he says it. This is of course the genius of his countersigning reading which, at the level of what he knew (without knowing yet) he had to read, thus gives place and birth. Birth of a dream shared by two (à deux), and about those two (d’eux): this is what “to the letter has happened” here and is signed on both sides literally—to the letter.

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NOTES

5 Andrée-Madeleine Clément, “Jacques Derrida et Hélène Cixous: entrechocs et entrechats entre philosophie et littérature” (masters thesis [in process], Université de Montréal, n.d.).
8 In French, Cixous writes “devissé”; this past participle is masculine for it is the father who is touched on the body, not the plaque which is the metonymy of what the régime of Vichy does to him. One will notice the assonance (perhaps miming the pronunciation of a foreign accent, distorting the word?) which underlines the “turn of the screw,” between “Vichy” and “devissé.”
11 It is not easy to identify the precise moment of this encounter, which took place, apparently, twice for the first time: from behind, as Cixous hears Derrida’s voice without seeing him: “I have nonseen him the first of the first times. . . . It was at the Sorbonne, he was passing an oral exam for the aggregation, I was very far in the back of a lecture hall, I could only see his back” (“Du mot à la vie,” 24); then in face-to-face, or in tête-à-tête at the Café Balzar, without coincidence. This scene has given rise to many “legends” in Cixous’s texts; Derrida also calls it to mind in H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . . (unpublished; I thank Laurent Milesi for giving me access to his translation), which will be published in the spring; trans. Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) (hereafter cited in text as HC). I analyzed this scene in another article: for the other part of this work on Cixous as a reader of Jacques Derrida, see “Circonfections: Les lire en secret,” to be published in Actes of the colloquium L’événement comme écriture: Lire Cixous et Derrida se lisant (Barcelona, June 2005), forthcoming in colloquium volume.
12 They were first published “side by side,” though separated, in 1997, in the journal Contretemps; the volume was called Voile, singular and without “genre” marks.
13 I insist here with this x on the figure of chiasm, which is very important in all of these exchanges between Derrida and Cixous. One knows that this etymological figure of the insect (insseo) had everything to do with the motif of the ant which appears in one of Derrida’s first commentaries regarding Cixous’s work. See “Fournîs,” in Lectures de la différence sexuelle, ed. Mara Negroni (Paris: Des Femmes, 1994), 69–102.
14 The dates indicated in parentheses correspond to the years when texts were written, not of publication, so as to follow more closely these textual intertwinnings.
16 Cixous, Le jour où je n’étais pas là (Paris: Gallièe, 2000), 118.
19 Unfortunately, I have to put aside in this study, which is a part of an extensive reading of this particular “corpus” in Derrida’s whole “corpus,” “Fournîs,” “Un ver à soie,” and Genèses, généalogies, genres et le génie, the three other “sides” of this fabulous “shoe box,” the factory of Derrida’s reading.
20 As a feminine noun, mémoire means “memory” or “recollection”; as a masculine noun it means “memorial,” “memoir.”
DERRIDA & CIXOUS


22 At the colloquium “Jacques Derrida and the Question of Life,” which took place in June 2005 (Château de la Bretesche, Missillac), Peggy Kamuf raised, not without relevance, several questions concerning the reception of this text of Derrida, asking why it is “so regularly overlooked and omitted from the ‘major works’ of Derrida’s late writings (is it because it deals with ‘fictional’ writing? And moreover by a woman writer?)” (unpublished, 4).

23 Kamuf, 3.

24 In their translation of Derrida’s H. C. pour la vie, c’est à dire . . . (H. C. for Life, That Is to Say . . .), Milesi and Herbrechter have translated the noun puissance (which was reinvented by Derrida in this essay, where he derives it from the subjunctive form puisse, the latter being for him, in a sense, and with reference to Cixous’s writing, its own source) as might. This is a brilliant translation, because it maintains both the “power” of the “puissance” (the might of mighty power) and the might of “it might be,” or “might it be,” “would that you might . . . ,” which are expressed in French with puisse (que je puisse, etc.). However, in the present essay, where Derrida’s text appears only in short excerpts, translating puissance as might seemed confusing, since the polysemic of what is in effect a neologism might not be clear to the reader in this case. We have tended therefore to maintain “power,” often with the French in parentheses, or else, as here, to leave it in French (following Kamuf’s lead, in the citation above). We have also left “puisse” in French on most occasions. (Editor’s note.)

25 See what Derrida confides about the preference he gives to dream in Fichus: “If I address to you such an oneirophilic discourse, it is because dream is the most welcoming element to mourning, to haunting memories, to the spectra of all spirits and to the return of ghosts” (Paris: Galilée, 2002), 56.

26 Derrida, “Prière d’insérer,” to H. C. pour la vie, c’est à dire . . .

27 This difference of opinion—that is, that there is not for her another side, that there is “a unique side without another side, and this would be life itself,” the living life, “life for life, life itself, life promised to life, sworn life” (HC 63–64)—is maintained between them (by him, at the least) until the end. Apparently, at least: for it seems that, in the middle of the sides, in the middle (or almost) of the book, and in spite of the reiteration of their difference stretched at both edges of this text which has neither beginning nor end, their disagreement manages to connect almost perfectly (almost, for one must also keep the difference alive, since it carries the promise of readings to come . . . ).

28 One will follow here the “line of life” opened by Kamuf about this “discovery/ invention of puissance” as an undervisible, originary modality, of powerless ‘power’ or force, the force of a prayer that life be given or preserved, kept and gardée as commanded by the jîoussaf of a writing that makes/lets come “really actually arrives, in real life. It is life for life” (HC 84). Really, actually, effectively, in life. In which, is to say, for. Life affirms itself, it is for itself, and thus for the other, the other’s life. Que l’autre vive, qu’il puisse, qu’elle puisse vivre” (Kamuf 4).

29 This refers to what I say elsewhere, in another part of this more extensive study, on “Fournirs.”

30 The word comes from Cixous in Or: Les lettres de mon père (Paris: Des Femmes, 1997), 115, and is quoted by Derrida (HC 98).

31 The idea of beginning is precisely what is constantly deferred in this whole reading which is inscribed in the interval of numerous renewals, as this series of sentences show (describing, from the beginning to the “end,” the indispensable and impossible first slicing [entame] of the reading of Cixous’s work): “At the moment of beginning, even before beginning . . . one knows, yes one knows that one will always have to begin again”
(HC 1); “Let us carry on as if I were abandoning these questions here” (HC 5); “This will have been so far, as a prelude, even before the first beginning, nothing but a date, the benediction of a date . . .” (HC 7); “End of the prelude. Which does not mean that I am ready to begin” (HC 7); “A palinode: this beginning with which I shall now begin again was already written; it came before the other, before everything I have just said” (HC 9); etc. See HC 14, 15, 23, 34, 73, 87, 90, 95, 102, 113, 122, 156, 166 up to the last bend: “And what I have said so far was merely a preparatory move, for me in any case; with a view to the time when, in a moment [tout à l’heure], I start beginning again to read Le Prénom de Dieu in this very place” (HC 166); “After the next to last of these next to last detours, here is the next to last one, via the next to last short story of Le Prénom de Dieu” (HC 174); “Here is the latest example then” (HC 175).

32 Kamuf, 2.

33 These asides (apartés) are numerous and often relegated to parentheses: a sort of withdrawal which is also, whatever what one says, a way to signal, to go sideways which is equivalent neither to an erasing nor to a reducing to silence (a murmur makes itself heard as well). See, for example, HC 16, 59, 77, 90, 96.

34 This is the title Derrida had at first chosen for the great collection of essays dedicated to his departed friends, which was actually published afterwards under the title Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde: Derrida, The Work of Mourning, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).