

WHISPERED SECRETS, ENCRYPTED LIVES

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I gave my friend a text to read by another friend who is a writer of fiction and non-fiction. A piece I was editing, it was a harrowing tale of discrimination against those living with the disability of mental illness, of madness suspected in whispered remarks, of privacy violated behind one's back. My friend thought the writing was brilliant. She was profoundly moved. But was it all real, she wanted to know, was it a true story? I'm not sure, I said, she writes stories. I don't know if my friend believed when I said I'm not sure she writes stories. I suspect she thought I might not be for real when I said I'm not sure. She probably thought *she* writes stories when I said I'm not sure. When she asked is it real I told myself I'm not sure, I on my side wanted to believe I'm not sure about what I believed to be real, while she on her side wanted to believe it was real when in reality I had already started to cross over to her side and begun to think: if only I might believe she writes stories. What cryptic madness!

She wanted to look behind the story I jealously guarded, to peek behind its veil. A cursory knowledge of the author's life, its public facts, would suggest it were believable, but it is also a fact of reality that she writes stories. My friend, the one who wanted to know was it real, no doubt suspected me of guarding her secret in plain sight, of not giving my friend away precisely in giving her away to be read, in editing her story, in inviting it for publication in the first place. I'm sure, *certes*, it doesn't matter if it's real. What I believed I was guarding was the delicious undecidability between reality and fiction. I wanted to protect the secret of writing itself.

Literature keeps reality in suspense, in question. Its secret, its infinite power, lies in keeping the secret of what it/she (*elle*) says. She/it (*elle*), Cixous, literature, my friend, what she avows—keeps this secret not in a hidden place but right in broad daylight, secreting it even as it avows and claims to unveil it. Literature encrypts what it tells, divulges, publishes. But this encryption is undecipherable, without key or ultimate knowledge in sight. Madwoman that literature is, it deprives of authority to decide, it gives away the secret to take away the power to choose between reality and fiction. It puts the reader at the mercy of a madness she wants to manage away. It compels surrender to the *Tout-puissance-autre* of the secret.

- *All of your philosophical publications* in the place of the secret
- *An autobiography in absolute secret. Absolutely private. All the more so for being public.*
- *No one will ever be able to prove that you are lying*
You never lie
- *You believe that? Or you believe that you believe?*
- *I believe.*

Hélène Cixous, *Hyperrêve*
(Paris : Galilée, 2006),
121–131.

Jacques Derrida, *Genèses, Généalogies, genres et le génie : les secrets de l'archive*
(Paris : Galilée, 2003).

Hélène Cixous, *Insister. À Jacques Derrida* (Paris : Galilée, 2006), 14–15.

- *If only I could believe you.*
- *No one will ever be able to prove that I don't believe*
Myself, I don't believe that I believe; I am certain.
- *Don't say "I am certain."*

In any case I was sure, *certes*, enjoying that word's encrypted secret, I did not have the right to decide if what my friend wrote was fiction or non-fiction, autobiography or autofiction. The text my friend gave me did not authorise me to unveil the secret or the non-secret in this work made public. How could the madwoman who has apparently written this story authorise her editor or publisher to decide between reality and fiction?

Is what separates genius, then, from everything that might seamlessly connect it to a genesis, a genealogy or a genre, not this absolute event that marks the undecidable limit between the secret and the phenomenon of the secret, between the absolute secret and the phenomenal appearing of the secret as such? This is where the genius of inspired events plays along with Literature, with its Omnipotence-other. For Literature draws this undecidable line the instant it whips the secret it keeps from you into its cipher, out of sight, true, but that it keeps (garde) absolutely while handing it to you to look at again (re-garder), but without holding out any hope of your grasping it, that is, while depriving you of the power or the right to choose between reality and fiction, between fiction which is always a real event, like the phantasm, and so-called reality, which may always be nothing but a hyperbole of the fiction. That, at least, is how I interpret the word "other" in the term that Cixous reserves for Literature, Tout-puissance-autre.

There into her madness is where I could not follow her. Her account of solitary confinement on a psychiatric ward could only ever remain unpublished. To communicate it would breach the very experience it seeks to recount. It could only ever have the status of anecdote, *inédit*, given without being given, at once un-shared and over-shared. The anecdote is the secret awaiting both my editorial assent and restraint, which the moral of my friend's story would restrain me from exercising, so its gratuitousness runs unchecked with its veracity. Hélène, like my other friend, suffers on account of the secret. Loved and needed, it also attracts vulgarity and indiscretion. Literarizing is the anecdote that runs off at the mouth. It suspends disbelief in giving free rein to what might be better left unsaid. Its hyperbole breaks down the door welcomes invites in madness.

Everything that Hélène Cixous gives to the BNF will remain sealed, readable unreadable, that is, marked with the sign or verdict of this boarding up which not only has never kept anyone from reading, but opens on the contrary an infinite field to reading and its pleasures—to the love of the Omnipotence-other of Literature. The door is barred but please come in.

The door is flung open to all the rooms, the Zoom rooms, the pink rooms in the E(a)ves, the white padded rooms, from which she/it/my friend (*elle*) is voluntarily and involuntarily barred. The door was opened to denying myself the power to choose between testimony and phantasm.

Derrida, *Genèses*, 57–58.

David Wills, "Passionate Secrets and Democratic Dissidence," *diacritics* 38, no. 1–2 (2008), 22–23.

Cixous, *Insister*, 14.

Derrida, *Genèses*, 57.

The first day I saw her it was *from behind*, her cropped white-grey curly hair neatly ending to reveal a slither of skin above a billowing grey silk jacket that veiled her back. Someone brought her a bunch of red roses to mark the attempt to octogenarianize her. With graceful gratitude she stood and slowly turned to show her face, her neat lips as red as the flower petals. I saw her for the first time several times further over the ensuing three days, those firstdays, *jours de l'an*. The Cixousversaire, announces the NYU website, will recur Every Day until Sep. 16, 2017. Every time I readlisten to her I see her for the first time, her everydays every time the firstdays on which her author is born. The anecdote as patent secret hangs from the thread (*fil*) of genre, from literature's engendering, its generation and genealogy, its generativity and generosity. Literature is born in (the) place of the secret. It gives birth to the very possibility of the secret. Secret reserve and crepuscular Eve of literature, born in the pink eaves of dimmed roses.

Literature always comes from behind, shows its back, event of the phantasm, phantasm of the event. It turns away, disarming surprise. In the anecdote, life seems to expose its face, however ugly or grimacing or sneering or snarling. But what the reader has to negotiate with in literature is life in its back and behind one's back. Even as it turns to face us as HC did the first time I saw her, there is no revelation, no illuminating reasoning with madness because nothing was ever hidden. The anecdotal life is all written and given away on a postcard, like Zoom face-boxes. There's no turning away to face the darkness of that black square protecting the home from violation. The back is not the reverse of the face, hidden encrypted behind appearance, but a *secret de Polichinelle* of writing's heteropaternal miscegenation. It's fooling no-one.

In a screen of squares behind their backs our task was to make sense of manage discipline calm down don't be anxious about the deadly virus or if you must be don't shirk get back to work for the good of the student experience die for Pret Starbucks rentier capital the VC's salary

the madness of lazy unionized teachers. One department's plans distinguished in-classroom teaching from *online f2f*. It needed decrypting. They had obviously misunderstood the instructions. I read recalcitrance veiled in plain sight, a blasphemous affront to the University's Strongly Preferred Model. It was impudent heresy giving the lie to the Holy Writs.

Could I be held to account for giving away secrets? All manner of stories I can tell about it, I can say everything (that's the gift of democracy), but the secret will remain silent without keeping anything back. It can give it all away yet guard itself because the secret is foreign to speech without being reducible to that in speech which is foreign to it.

Hélène Cixous, *Jours de l'an* (Paris : Des Femmes, 1990).

Derrida, *Genèses*, 31.

Derrida, *Genèses*, 59.

Wills, "Passionate Secrets," 26.

Jacques Derrida, *La Carte Postale : De Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris : Flammarion, 1980).

Jacques Derrida, *Passions* (Paris : Galilée, 1993), 20.

Jacques Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris : Galilée, 199), 46 ; *Genèses*, 59.

Derrida, *Passions*, 66–67.

Neither in with speech nor a stranger to that world, the anecdote is unanswerable to speech. It is a shield against all holding to account. It offers an absolute nonresponse without answering to anyone or anything whatsoever, not even itself, admitting to no surety or excuse. Of the anecdote there is no response-able author nor reader, no having to respond, no having to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, only telling stories.

These secrets, in this volume, I don't give them away. I never will. They know too much. I respect their reserve, their twists and turns, I admire their disguises. They had to be well hidden to slip through the cracks in my walls when I wasn't in the least prepared to let them come. And then time passed. One day you can look the dead person's photo in the face. When one had just died my death, yours, jets of boiling tears kept me from seeing your faces. The months, the mes (les mois) of tears are past.

Look *my* death in the face? An impossible confrontation. Death is the *absolute secret*. It must remain hidden. *If it shows itself to me, it means that I am dead*. Death sees me from behind. It's on my back. This surprise, though, just is life. Death given, granted and accepted, the secret unveiled would be no life worth living. It would be the weight of an everyday responsibility when I face death, when I am *toward* it, instead of with my back turned to it. Only when no-one can die my death, nor I yours, when death is not as substitutable everyday in a month for another—only when death is irreplaceably the lastday of the year, only then am I called to responsibility. Even this call, which turns me round to death and gives me its impossibility, comes from behind, out of sight.

The anecdotal life, though, does not stand before the other. It dissimulates under judgment's gaze. It doesn't accept answer to the gift of death that would steal the very chanciness of death without which there's no life worth living. The jets of homonymic sleights of hands, egos for months, fiction for reality, each everyday for another, veil the faces of death. *No* responsiveness. *Shall we call this death? Death given? Death received? I see no reason not to call that life, existence, trace. And it is not the contrary.*

The anecdote, then, it's all whispering surface, the self-veiling texture of a grey silk(worm's) woven fabrication. If there's a truth in this shroud, it's not what is revealed or confessed but simply what happens, what arrives at its back. In truth, we never learn face-to-face. Nothing gets revealed in classrooms. It may elude myopic administrators, but this thing called learning only happens with the arrival from behind of nonknowledge. For this reason, the life of the mind has only ever been animated by a series of technological articulations in the vertebral column which put humans on their feet, the hand stretched out in front in a posture of frontal mastery. Digital tools aren't the death knell of humanist education but its predictable inheritance. Education has always been irreducibly prosthetic.

Hélène Cixous, *Rêve je te dis* (Paris : Galilée, 2003), 12.

Hélène Cixous, « La fiction et ses fantômes: Une lecture de l'Unheimliche de Freud », in *Prénoms de personne* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), 31–32.

Derrida, *Genèses*, 39–40.

Derrida, *Donner la mort*, 64.

Derrida, *Passions*, 70.

Jacques Derrida, « Un ver à soie », in Derrida and Cixous, *Voiles* (Paris : Galilée, 1998).

David Wills, *Dorsality: Thinking Back Through Technology and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Masks to backs, the rows of Orpheuses and Euridices that await teachers trying to cheat death, are a conjuring trick to conceal a graver controversy. The risk of turning away, turning one's back on, of receding from sight into the distance, of not seeing it coming, of being unable to con-front it—there is no life without that irresponsibility. That's its clandestinity.

If no-one can follow me into madness, nor can they die for me. You cannot die *for* me, *in my place*, only your death whatever that is. And yet in a very real sense *for* me you are dead. From you, my parent, the one who gave birth to me, there is no response, except perhaps in me, you in my place, I in yours. I can't call anymore, those casual exchanges of the everyday cut off to a monologue. In hysterical mourning, Hélène's on the other end of the line, telephone receiver for the gift of my mourning.

Néant, *nothingness*, née en, *born in*, dead in, néant, *nothingness*! Néant! *In French what a fabulous word, a volley of words fell on the flowerbeds and the mimosas, everything was cries and music, I cried out: Live on! I cried: Papa! Papa! When a life is taken from us, you will have noticed, we cry out the name of the cherished being, we conjure it, we repeat it, in place of all language's words we name and call, we endlessly ring out: Grandma! Papa!, we stab the void with the unique name, we stitch it back, we multiply it infinitely to change the nothingness into music, we hammer the anvil of silence with our chanted names: Eurydice! Mama!, we cry out for the being who does not respond, we shout in her place: calling chases away the silence, contradicts death's sentence. We call the being who is not here, we hold her back by the fringes of her being, by the letters of her name, we pray we cry Dieu! We cryate God! Dieu, Nothingness. And the prayer answers itself. The cryayer. The invention of literature is an urgent defense against pillaging, massacre, forgetting. Against our own auto-immunity. Our terrible system of adaptation, our awful submission to reality. Our detestable spiritual economy. You are dead. I snatch the world from you. I take your breath away. It's over. Done for. Finished. Says mortality.*

– No! I cry.

No, I cry, cry out, cryate, as the corners of my mouth grimace, the words yelled into the shower jets that blast the crystalline smudges from my cheeks. No! I howl. Hélène's calm measured accented English is all love and velvet tenderness and mundane passion. Almost six months had passed, the pain become an everyday secret, drowned screams and encrypted vociferations buried under cascades of water to flush jets of boiling tears, balm for cheeks as red as Nobody's Rose (*die Niemandrose*). I readlistened to her over and over, an almost daily ritual to wear down blunt soften the piercing blade-sharp cry. Her stories of life passing one to the other cradled the sweet torture of hanging on by a whisk of hair.

Hélène Cixous, *Ayai! Le cri de la littérature* (Paris : Galilée, 2013), 25.

One cry for another, one behind backing the other, the braid of homonymy *encrypts everything*, the contagious untranslatable homonymy jealously guarding the cryptic archive of secret pseudonyms, metonymies, and anecdotes, entangled web of telephone wires and fishing nets. The secrecy of the anecdote isn't silent. It murmurs or cries. It sounds. It calls to be heard, audible but unreadable. The secret of homophony, a secret affinity of sound unseen on the page, protects the anecdote and its cryptography brazenly cracked. The secret's infinite game of substitutions is a merry-go-round of masks that mask nothing, the echo of displacement, her cry for my cry. Its uncanniness doesn't come from the depths of the unthinkable but from the dangerously insistent vibration of the *Heimliche*. The intensification of the real back to back,

beating shouting crying howling screaming weeping passing over to itself, produces fiction.

Fiction is connected to life's economy by a link as undeniable and ambiguous as that which passes from the Unheimliche to the Heimliche: it is not unreal; it is the "fictional reality," the vibration of reality. The Unheimliche in fiction overflows and comprises the Unheimliche of real life. But if fiction is another form of reality, it is understood that the secret of the Unheimliche does not refer to a secret more profound than that of the Unheimliche which envelops the Unheimliche, just as death overflows life.

Hélène's homonyms are the strands of hair by which I clutch at life, always slipping away each day beneath behind another that absolutely singular life. The photographs fade bleached in the sun, technicolour only in my dreams, but her voice worms in my ear, curled like braids of phonemes. *They weave by secretion an irreplaceable tunic of consonants.*

Doomed to the obscurity of blindness yet far from silenced in the crypt, life sounds, however softly, murmuring at its edge. I readlisten to it as a musical score or a dream, a muted horn or racket of pipes and tubes. Life must be read by ear, as Hélène reads Jacques, as I overhear their secreted secrets, resonant vocables, dreamed-up words, fantastical animals, *heard without being seen, as on the telephone.*

I readlisten *anecdotelephonidiomatically*, I confess. I lend my ear not to the gift of death but to the gift of the word (*donner le mot*), passing the word about and plotting shamelessly madly.

As if I were listening to the murmured circumfession that each one of your texts hides itself as, attempting itself, fleeing, praying, conjuring itself. It is your voice that I read at the portal of your text. No one has ever read a text so mysteriously, secretly inexplicably autobiographical, from start to finish, as your philosophy. Even your most professionally philosophical, most universally political texts arise out of your soul wrenchings.

Derrida, *Genèses*, 39.

Jacques Derrida, *H. C. pour la vie, c'est à dire* (Paris, Galilée, 2002).

Cixous, « *La fiction* », 24.

Cixous, « *La fiction* », 31.

Cixous, « *La fiction* », 35.

Derrida, « *Un ver à soie* », 56.

Jacques Derrida, « *Fourmis* », in *Lectures de la différence sexuelle* (Paris : des femmes, 1994), 75.

Cixous, *Insister*, 30.