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Chapter Four

Chant du Corps Interdit: The Theatre of Hélène Cixous

> Je peux adorer une voix. Je suis une femme: l'amour de la voix: rien n'est plus puissant que l'intime toucher d'une voix voilée, profonde mais réservée venant me réveiller le sang; le premier rayon d'une voix qui vient à la rencontre du coeur nouveau-né. Mon coeur est dans l'appartenance d'une voix taillée dans l'obscurité brillante, une proximité infiniment tendre et réservée.
>
> Hélène Cixous, *Vivre L'Orange* (1979)[1]
>
> [I can adore a voice : I am a woman : the love of the voice : nothing is more powerful than the intimate touch of a veiled voice, profound but reserved coming to awaken my blood; the first ray of a voice that comes to meet the newly-born heart. My heart is in the belongingness fashioned out of shining darkness, a nearness infinitely tender and reserved.]
>
> Hélène Cixous, *To Live the Orange* (1979) [2]

In this chapter, I would like to establish that Hélène Cixous developed a form of theatre that performed the enmeshing of writer and writing - the embodiment of text, the textualization of body - in the space of the voice. Some consideration of her theoretical writings will pave the way for a discussion of her theatre.

In her 1979 text *Vivre L'Orange*, quoted above, Cixous writes of words that 'retreat from things, and the noise of their steps [that]covers the throbbing of things, [...] words that fall upon things and fix their quaverings and make them discordant and deafen them.' (p.8) This essay is a paean to the writings of the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, the encounter with whose texts Cixous describes in epiphanic terms. For, in contrast to writers who use

[1] *Vivre l'orange / To Live the Orange*, (1979) in *L'Heure de Clarice Lispector* (Paris: des femmes, 1989), p.9. Further page references will be given in the body of the text.
[2] *To Live the Orange*, a parallel translation revised by Cixous herself in *L'Heure de Clarice Lispector* (Paris: des femmes, 1989), p.10. Further page references will be given in the body of the text.

language merely to represent things, and, as a consequence, annihilate their 'thingness', Lispector is, according to Cixous, one of a group of writers whose 'voices pass gently behind things and lift them and gently bathe them, and take the words in their hands and lay them with infinite delicateness close by things, to call them and lull them without pulling them and rushing them.' (p.9) Susan Sellers has pointed to Martin Heidegger's essay, 'The Thing' in order to cast light on Cixous's notion of a writing of contiguity. In this essay, Heidegger writes of thought that does not seek to appropriate the material world, but seeks instead to 'be beside it'; he concludes that progress involves a 'step back from the thinking that merely represents - that is, explains - to the thinking that responds and recalls.'[3] In her essay, Cixous uses metaphors of voice and listening to express this non-oppositional mode of apprehension of the world:

> Il y a des femmes qui parlent pour veiller et pour sauver, non pas pour attraper, avec des voix presqu'invisibles, attentives et précises comme des doigts virtuoses, et rapides comme des becs d'oiseaux, mais pas pour saisir et dire, des voix pour rester tout près des choses, comme leur ombre lumineuse, pour réfléchir et protéger les choses qui sont toujours aussi délicates que les nouveaux-nés. (p.8)
>
> [There are women who speak to watch over and save, not to catch, with voices almost invisible, attentive and precise, like virtuoso fingers, and swift as birds' beaks, but not to seize and mean, voices to remain near by things, as their luminous shadow, to reflect and protect the things that are ever as delicate as the newly-born. (p.10]

Through a sequence of aural images, she links receptivity to the ability to *hear* language and a capacity for slowness. In contemplating the orange, through Lispector, Cixous learns that 'there is a time for listening to the vibrations that things produce in detaching themselves from the nothing-being to which our blindness relegates them, there is a time for letting things struggling with indifference to allow themselves to be heard.'(p.24) She knows, and

[3] Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans A. Hofstadter (New York:Harper and Row, 1975), pp.165-82, quoted in Susan Sellers, *The Cixous Reader* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.83.

writes - as Lispector does - in darkness, with eyes closed, with her 'speleologist's ears. That listen to the growing poetry when it is still subterranean, but struggling slowly in the breast to bring itself forth to the incantation of the outside. (p.18) To those for whom 'loving the moment is a necessity', but who never have 'the slow, sanguineous time, that is the condition of this love' **(p.?),** Cixous dedicates the word *spelaïon*: cave, gourd of voices, ear, orange:

> *spelaïon,* parce qu'il est en lui-même une gourde pleine de voix, une oreille enchantée, l'instrument d'une musique continue, une espèce d'orange ouverte, sans fond. (p.19)
>
> [*spelaïon*, as it is in itself a gourd full of voices, an enchanted ear, the instrument of a continuous music, an open, bottomless species of orange. (p.20)]

In this text, then, listening body and material world - the flesh of the orange - are fused in language. It is the ability to wait, and to listen, that enables the writer to 'live the orange', through writing. It is in waiting, and in listening, that the woman/writer (for it is women who are in question here) can also contact something of the materiality of her life outside or beyond signification, rooted as it is in the controls of speculative reason and the ego. Commenting on the development of the modern ego, Max Horkheimer noted that the ego 'is felt to be related to the functions of domination, command and organization',[4] while Heidegger, searching for a way of thinking that would be different from speculative, representational thought, describes hearing as 'our need and necessity [...] to hear the appeal of what is most thought-provoking' - a thinking hearing.[5] In *Vivre L'Orange*, Cixous suggests that some women (writers) have gone some way toward relinquishing the constraints of speculative reason in order to listen to and hear their own bodies, in the first instance, to 'bathe' in the materiality of body in wor(l)d, to live '*before,* before all explanation, before all reason, before god, before all hope. Or after.' (p.31) In a series of extraordinary images for the circulation of sound and oxygen in the blood, she uses the condition of listening as a metaphor for the possibility of dialogue between self and world, that is not based on systems

[4] Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason* (1974), quoted in David Levin, *The Listening Self*, op.cit., p.12.
[5] Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking* (1968), quoted in David Levin, *The Listening Self*, op.cit., p.17.

of exclusion or opposition, but which establishes the self in the midst of the world, at the centre of a continuous flux between inside and outside. This seems to suggest a Heideggerian project for a way of thinking, and of writing, that would be 'deeply intertwined with an ontologically developed listening.'[6] And here, as in all of Cixous's writings on this topic, she suggests that it is women who have the potential to gain privileged access to this way of being in the world:

> Des sens coulent, circulent, des messages aussi divinement compliqués que les étranges signaux microphonétiques lancés aux oreilles du sang, des tumultes, des appels, des réponses inaudibles vibrent, des relations mystérieuses s'établissent. (p.31)
> [Senses flow, circulate, messages as divinely complicated as the strange, microphonetic signals, conveyed to the ears from the blood, tumults, calls, inaudible answers vibrate, mysterious connections are established.(p.32)]

A woman's writing for Cixous, then, could re-inscribe the nearness, the 'being-beside' of the first voice, the voice that held and nourished, but did not seek to seize or own, the voice that opened up spaces of otherness within itself. Writing that is vitally connected to its bodily roots will be contiguous, will not be driven by an insistence on unitary meaning, but will enable multiple meanings to exist within its porous envelope or skin. The feminine/maternal body therefore provided Cixous with a provocative poetics of the body that would form the basis of her theory of writing. According to this theory, writing has the power to transcend the psychic division which psychoanalysis has established as more pronounced in women than in men, largely as a result of the way in which the maternal is constructed within patriarchy. The work of French women psychoanalysts from the mid-1970s onwards repeatedly points to a pattern of 'psychic partition' in the psycho-sexual development of women in Western culture. The main thesis of Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni's book on female psycho-sexual development, *Partage des femmes*, for example, is that it is woman's lot (*partage*) in our social arrangements to bear an internal division (*partage*). The division between men and women, between the imaginary and the symbolic, between body and language, is lived

[6] David Levin, *The Listening Self*, op.cit., p.17.

on behalf of both sexes by women as a division within themselves. Lemoine-Luccioni locates 'woman' at the origin of language, 'au lieu de passage, de séparation, à la coupure; elle l'est, cette coupure'[7] ['At the place of passage, of separation, at the break; she is this break'] – woman is heavily marked by the rupture at the origin of language and culture, she unwittingly lives this partition in her body and her psychic life on behalf of both sexes:

> Mais elle ne le sait pas. Il faut que l'homme le lui dise; sinon elle s'oublie comme un. [...] toutes les pertes de la vie d'une femme […] suffisent à circonscrire un phénomène de partition imaginaire, comme régime psychique proprement féminin. La femme vit avec la peur de perdre une partie d'elle-meme. [...] Plutôt que l'angoisse de la castration, la femme connaît ainsi l'angoisse de la partition.[8]
>
> [But she doesn't know it. Man has to tell her ; otherwise she forgets herself as one. […] all the losses in a woman's life justify the circumscription of a phenmenon of imaginary partition, as a psychic regime that is properly feminine. Woman lives in fear of losing a part of herself […] Rather than castration anxiety therefore, woman experiences partition anxiety.]

Luce Irigaray, writing in 1974, had already commented on the 'partition' of women in Western culture, which she attributed to the woman's 'extradition' or 'exile' from her form of desire (*[son] économie désirante*[9]) and the enforced identification with the male desiring economy. According to Irigaray, women, in an important sense, never get beyond the beginning of their story within this structure: what has been lost is the very possibility for women of developing as subjects in the same way as men do, within a libidinal economy based on their desire, and with the possibility of re-producing, of re-presenting to themselves what they have lost in the loss of the mother:

> Alors il s'agit plutôt d'une proscription de la représentation, et du signifiant, pour la femme d'un temps de son économie libidinale, et

[7] Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, *Partage des femmes* (Paris: du Seuil, 1976), p.71.
[8] ibid., pp.98, 81, 71.
[9] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum. De l'autre femme.* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), p.47.

> non le moindre puisque celui où elle serait démarqué de son *premier* temps par sa re-marque. Mais disons qu'au commencement s'arrêterait son histoire, pour se laisser prescrire par celle d'un autre: celle de l'homme-père.[10]
>
> [Therefore, it is more a question, for the woman, of proscription of the representation of, and the signifier for a time in her libidinal economy – and not the least important time – when she is demarcated from her *first* time by her re-marking. Let us say that her story ends at the beginning, as it is supplanted by that of another: the father-man.]

One of the questions this book has been asking is to what extent a sense of fragmentation and division - the sense of being fixed in the mirror of primary narcissism, stuck on the threshold of Imaginary and Symbolic - has found expression in the theatre created by French women playwrights in the last thirty years. I have been pursuing the notion that the theatres of Sarraute, Duras and Cixous and Renaude all inhabit the psychic borderlands between the vocalic body and language, between the specular and the auditory - although each navigates this terrain in very different ways. Cixous's incipient poetics, as evidenced in her theoretical writings from the 1970s, attributes to *writing* the power to heal the partition in women, to allow them to move beyond the place which culture has assigned them: the in-between of Imaginary and Symbolic. In this she echoes Irigaray's thinking on the power of language to shape bodies, and her belief that all change begins with changes in discourse. In Cixous's 1975 essay, 'Le Rire de la Méduse', she asserts forcefully that 'l'écriture a été jusqu'à présent [...] gérée par une économie libidinale et culturelle - donc politique, typiquement masculine'.[11] [writing has, until now, been controlled by a libidinal and cultural (and therefore political) economy that is typically masculine.][12] In other words, writing, and cultural production in

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10 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum*, p.47.

11 Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse*, first published in 1975 in a special edition of the journal L'Arc 61, pp.39-54. Republished in 2010, by the Éditions Galilée, Paris. All page references are to the more recent edition. (p.43).

12 'The Laugh of the Medusa', translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in New French Feminisms (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), pp.245-264 (249). All further pages references will be given in the body of the text.

general, cannot be separated from the way desire is structured in culture. In the same text she describes writing as 'l'énorme machine qui tourne et répète sa "vérité" depuis des siècles'[13] [that enormous machine that has been operating and turning out its truths for centuries (249)] – a truth that is closely aligned with the evolution of rational thought. Cixous posits 'l'autre bisexualité' [the other bisexuality] in writing, a writing 'in the in-between' ('Admettre qu'écrire, c'est justement travailler [dans] l'entre (p.51)), which would maintain difference but build on 'un incessant échangment de l'un entre l'autre sujet différent. [...] non-exclusion de la différence ni d'un sexe, et à partir de cette "permission" que l'on se donne, multiplication des effets d'inscription du désir, sur toutes les parties de mon corps et de l'autre corps.'[14][an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. […] non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and from this "self permission", multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body. (254)] Jane Gallop, commenting on Cixous's notion of an 'other bisexuality', notes that bisexuality, traditionally linked with hysteria in women, designates a positive goal in Cixous's theoretical writing:

> Neither the fantasmatic resolution of differences in the imaginary, nor the fleshless, joyless assumption of the fact of one's lack of unity in the symbolic, but an other sort of bisexuality, one that pursues, loves and accepts both the imaginary and the symbolic, both theory and flesh.[15]

For Cixous, the woman writer is well-placed to write the *movement between* the two positions, between discourse and body: because 'aucune femme n'empile autant de défenses anti-pulsionelles qu'un homme',[16] [no woman stockpiles as many defences for countering the drives as does a man. (251)], she has greater access to the 'mother', the 'nonname' of pre-verbal fusion, and so is in a good position to inscribe this part of experience in language.

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13 ibid., p.44.

14 ibid., p.46.

15 Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction*: F*eminism and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), p.150.

16 'Le Rire de la Méduse', pp.47-48.

'Mother' in this text is 'l'équivoix qui t'affecte, te pousse depuis ton sein à venir au langage, qui lance *ta* force, [...] la partie de toi qui entre en toi t'espace et te pousse à inscrire dans la langue ton style de femme.'[17] [the equivoice that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force; […] that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style. (252)] It seems that what Cixous refers to as the 'mother' here and elsewhere is, in fact, the boundary-line, the mark of partition to which Lemoine-Luccioni refers: the moment of transition from Imaginary to Symbolic, so difficult for women according to the accounts of the women psychoanalysts referred to here. 'Mother'/the maternal is a metaphor for the woman on the threshold of language, the force - expressed in terms of vocality and rhythm - that propels her through the mirror, so to speak. Cixous exhorts the woman writer to find again the moment of her doubling, to inscribe *that* moment in writing. And it would seem to be a vocal/auditory moment. Women's writing could then enact a *movement between* the specular and the auditory, between the utopian body beyond discourse and its representations in culture, between male and female positions.

In an article entitled 'Melancholy Identifications: The Inner Cinema of Hélène Cixous', Emma Wilson makes the illuminating point that 'the scopic is re-viewed as regime of loss, melancholy and distance'[18] in Cixous's writing. Wilson reads Cixous through Judith Butler's reading of Freud's theory of melancholia in her essay 'Melancholy Gender and Refused Identification',[19] according to which the self is a sedimentation of objects loved and lost. In this essay, Butler develops her theory of the performativity of gender to suggest that 'we might understand "masculinity" and "femininity" as formed and consolidated through identifications which are in part composed of disavowed grief [...] heterosexual identity is purchased through a melancholic incorporation of the love that it disavows.'[20] Wilson suggests that the process of mourning is forever present in Cixous's writing, as she inspects the painful processes of self-construction, 'whereby loss is both internalized and refused,

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17 ibid., pp.48-49.
[18] Emma Wilson, 'Identification and Melancholia: The Inner Cinema of Helene Cixous', *Paragraph*, Volume 23, November 2000, pp.258-69 (268).
[19] Judith Butler, 'Melancholy Gender and Refused Identification' in *The Psychic Life of Powe*r: *Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp.132-150.
[20] Ibid., p.139.

where the self emerges as a product of both memory and desire'.[21] Thus, for Wilson, there is a painful avowal of ungrievable loss in Cixous's (fictional) writing, based on 'the infinitely close, painstaking observation she evokes.'[22] In her early theoretical writings, Cixous makes it clear that she views the primary task of the woman writer as that of writing the *movement between* two positions, between discourse and body, between masculine and feminine. For Cixous, then, writing is a way of moving in the in-between of the positions the subject is obliged to occupy within a largely heterosexual community, a way of awakening unavowed losses. If, as Cixous wrote in *Le Rire de la Méduse*, "l'inconscient [est] l'autre contrée sans limites [...] où survivent les refoulés'[23] [the unconscious that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive (250)], then writing is the place where the past survives, where the pain of loss - both personal and historical – is avowed and re-lived.

In 1977, Cixous wrote an article for *Le Monde* entitled 'Aller à la mer' in which she analysed the relationship of (Western) women to the practices of contemporary theatre. She begins this article by stating that 'Il faut toujours qu'une femme soit morte pour que la pièce commence'.[24] [It is always necessary for a woman to die so that the play can begin.] Citing the examples of Electra, Antigone, Ophelia and Cordelia, she concludes that theatre functions as specular fantasy, where women characters act as mirrors, reflecting heroic values for male spectators. Theatre, even more than fiction, is the 'lieu privilégié d'une double perversion voyeuriste-exhibitionniste' [privileged place of a double perversion, both voyeurist and exhibitionist], the place where women are framed as both specular objects and mirror-images of men – the privileged space of representation of what Irigaray referred to as *hom(m)osexualité*: 'l'auto-affection de l'homme par l'intermédiaire du féminin approprié dans son langage.'[25][the self-love of man through the intermediary of the feminine appropriated into his language.] Cixous concludes by calling for a theatre that would lessen dependence on the visual and stress the auditory. Thus, she began to write plays when she began to see theatre as a privileged space for the voicing of the body/text:

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[21] Emma Wilson, 'Identification and Melancholia: The Inner Cinema of Helene Cixous', op.cit., p. 267.
[22] Ibid., p.265.
[23] *Le Rire de la Méduse*, op.cit., p.45.
[24] Hélène Cixous, 'Aller à la mer', *Le Monde*, 28 April 1977, p.19.
[25] Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, pp.156,168.

> [...] apprendre à aiguiser toutes nos oreilles, surtout celles qui savent saisir les battements de l'inconscient, entendre les silences et au-delà: Pas de « distanciation », au contraire, cette scène-corps n'hésitera pas à approcher, approcher à (se) mettre en danger, mais de vie.[26]
> [[…] to learn to attune all our ears, especially those that know how to capture the movements of the unconscious, to hear the silences and beyond. No more 'alienation', quite the opposite : this stage-body will not hesitate to come close up, to get near the danger, but to be alive.]

The creation of a *scène-corps* (stage-body) would entail a return to the mother, as the homophonic title of the article suggests: a place where women can both listen and be heard, where they can speak and hear the incessant *movement* of the sea in its diffuseness, its multiplicity and its indeterminacy. This image suggests an amniotic globe which contains both actors and spectators, surrounding and permeating them with sound.

> Il suffit d'une femme qui se tienne au-delà de l'interdit, se vivant nombreuse.
> – 'Aller à la mer'
> [All it would take would be for a woman to go beyond prohibition, to be multiple.]

Above all, this would be a form of theatre that would create the conditions for an auditory apprehension of movements in the in-between of body and text, conscious and unconscious meanings. Recalling Artaud's conception of the 'function' of theatre as 'quelque chose d'aussi localisé et d'aussi précis que la circulation du sang dans les artères, ou le développement, chaotique en apparence, des images du rêve dans le cerveau'[27] [something as localised and as precise as the circulation of the blood in the arteries, or the apparently chaotic development of dream images in the brain.], Cixous envisions a theatre that would stage a woman 'dans son corps, depuis son sang [...] où se décide son histoire', and where 'il suffit d'un seul geste, mais capable de transformer le monde'[28] [in her body, starting with her

[26] Hélène Cixous, 'Aller à la mer'.
[27] Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p.141.
[28] Hélène Cixous, 'Aller à la mer', p.19.

blood […] where her story is decided', and where 'one gesture –capable of transforming the world – will suffice'].

The power of theatre for Cixous at this point was clearly its potential for undermining the scopic regime, for using the vocal and auditory dimensions of theatre to collapse the boundary between body and text in a way that cinema could never do. Her first play was produced at the Théâtre d'Orsay in Paris in February 1976; the event also marked Simone Benmussa's inauguration as a director for the stage. *Portrait de Dora*[29] was first written by Cixous as a radio play, drawn from her novel *Portrait du Soleil*, and Benmussa states in her published notes for the production that it was the fact that the text was 'not theatrical' that made it interesting to her, as it enabled her to 'avoid the habitual theatrical yoke, the yoke that constricts the actors' freedom and forces them to keep on the rails of theatrical "language."'[30] On the page, the text presents what Benmussa refers to as a 'jigsaw',[31] a fluid (without scene division) interplay of five voices - that of Dora, her father, Freud, Madame K. (her father's mistress) and Monsieur K. (Madame K's husband). Cixous draws on Freud's *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, his notorious case of a 'failed' analysis cut short by the patient herself. Her text focuses on Dora's betrayal by her father, and subsequently by Freud, and on her defiance of Freud and extrication of herself from the triumvirate of patriarchal voices that surround her. The text as written by Cixous plays on a confusion of identity between the three men - Monsieur K., who Dora claims attempted to seduce her, Freud, who seems to cast himself sometimes in the role of Monsieur K. and sometimes in the role of Dora's father, and the father himself. The written text reveals Cixous's close attention to the quality of voice - tone, level, colour. The challenge to the listener inherent in the original radio play is to enter the intimacy of Freud's cabinet and decipher the voices at play in Dora's head as she undergoes the talking cure. The text presents at least three levels of *play* - present 'reality' (Freud and Dora), Dora's narrated memories, and her dreams/fantasies. It was this aspect of the text that allowed Benmussa to dramatise a tension

[29] Hélène Cixous, *Portrait de Dora* in *Théâtre: Portrait de Dora* et *La Prise de l'école de Madhubaï* (Paris: des femmes, 1976).

[30] Simone Benmussa, *Benmussa Directs* (London: John Calder, 1979), p.11.

[31] ibid., p.10.

between the visual and auditory dimensions of the stage, thereby upsetting 'the everyday, restrictive ordering of space and time imposed on us by the powers that be.'[32]

Cixous's skilful interplaying of voices and superimposition of different time-frames to create a staging of the confusion of voices and genders, memories and fantasies that go to make up a self, resulted in a play that was sufficiently fragmented to draw the listener into the intimate space of the voice and to *create* in the spaces between the voices. Her text is so loosely-woven that it requires considerable mental gymnastics on the part of the listener, who is constantly on the move, so to speak, as are the voices, between levels of reality and fantasy, between genders, between temporal and spatial frames. Benmussa seized upon the mobile, oneiric potential of this text, it seems, to create a staged production that intercut live voice with recorded voice, slide and film projections[33] with live performance, in order to explore the tensions between past and present, dream and reality, narrative fiction and theatre. Her concept was based on the notion of convergence of different styles of 'writing' - theatrical, novelistic, cinematographic - in the stage space, in order to enable movement between the different levels of memory, reality, dream and fantasy. Writing of this production, Sharon Willis suggests that 'partially or completely untethered from character [...] voice takes on a life of its own, enters the scene as agency.'[34] Mairead Hanrahan points out that 'Dora's speech embraces uncertainty as much at the level of the word as at the level of the sentence'[35] and that 'as a dramatic character, Dora literally acquires a voice that is further reflected and amplified by the very form of the play.'[36] With its radical mining of the stage's potential for disjunction of voice and image, body and gender identity, and the foregrounding of the nature of the representative frame that inevitably results, the production was an important one in the history of women's theatre in France, and has been much examined in the context of feminist theatrical critiques of narrative-based modes of

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[32] Benmussa, *Benmussa Directs* , p.11.

[33] Marguerite Duras filmed sequences of improvised movement by the dancer, Carolyn Carlson, and made slides of the actors,which were projected onto the set for Benmussa's 1976 production.

[34] Sharon Willis, 'Helene Cixous's *Portrait de Dora*:The Unseen and the Unscene' in *Performing Feminisms*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore:Johns Hopkins U.P. ,1990), pp.77-91 (82).

[35] Mairead Hanrahan, 'Cixous's *Portrait de Dora*: The Play of Whose Voice?', *The Modern Language Review,* Volume 93, No. 1, 1998, pp.48-58 (55).

[36] Ibid., p. 58.

theatrical representation.[37] Cixous's first play was a blueprint for a mise-en-scène that would stage the instability of gender positions and explore the boundary of the conscious and the unconscious mind. Her principal mechanism for achieving this was the disjunction of body/image from voice, and Benmussa capitalised on the potential of this technique to draw the spectator into an oneiric space where bodies and voices are in a state of constant flux between presence and absence. At the centre of the welter of voices is Dora, a young woman who ultimately succeeds in resisting concerted attempts to ventriloquise her.

Cixous's next play, published in 1978, sees her establishing confidence in the theatrical form and going some way further toward realising her vision of a theatre that would stage a woman beyond interdiction, that would, in some way, free her from the frame of specular representation and the 'economy of the same'. *Le Nom d'Oedipe: chant du corps interdit*[38] was originally written as the libretto for an opera by André Boucourechliev, and it was first performed at the 1978 Avignon Festival. All the main characters - Jocaste, Oedipe, Tirésias - are doubled, each played by both an actor and a singer; singers and chorus operate in tandem. The characters are designated by initials in the text, a scriptural sign of the refusal of the name that is the play's subject. The notes on the back cover of the published text highlight Cixous's focus on the prohibition, within Western culture, on female desire, and the relegation – dereliction – of the woman to the maternal position:

> «Jocaste » «Oedipe» ne sont jamais que les prénoms occasionnels de toutefemme jamais femme de touthomme toujours fils. […] Que la femme soit reléguée à la place de la mère. Toutes les femmes, interdites de corps, de langue, interdites d'être femme, sont Jocaste.[39]
>
> Jocasta, Oedipus are merely the occasional first names of everywoman never woman and of everyman always a son […] Let the woman be relegated to the

37 The following accounts of Benmussa's production of Cixous's play are useful: Simone Benmussa, *Benmussa Directs* (London:John Calder, 1979), pp.9-21; Sharon Willis, 'Hélène Cixous's *Portrait de Dora*:The Unseen and the Unscene', op.cit.; Jeanette Lailou-Savona, 'In Search of Feminist Theatre:*Portrait of Dora*', in *Feminine Focus:The New Women Playwrights*, ed., Enoch Brater (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1989); Mairead Hanrahan, 'Cixous's *Portrait de Dora*: The Play of Whose Voice?', op.cit.

38 Hélène Cixous, *Le Nom d'Oedipe: Chant du corps interdit* (Paris: des femmes, 1978). Subsequent page references will be given in brackets in the body of the discussion.

39 Cixous, *Le Nom d'Oedipe,* back cover.

> place of the mother […] All women, banned from the body, from language, forbidden from being a woman, are Jocasta.

The text charts Jocasta's struggle to articulate, in words, the forbidden song of her body, during the final days spent with Oedipus, as she tries to convince him to relinquish his name and the myth that defines him, to persuade him not to heed the call of the city. Jocasta is centre-stage for much of the play, as she expresses her feelings of grief for her dead father and her desire for Oedipus. The language she uses enacts an undermining of the laws of grammar and syntax: her confusion of gender at the level of the noun and the pronoun and her non-adherence to the rules governing verbal tenses demonstrate her abandonment of the law of the Father and the rule of the Name. Her words collapse the separation of male and female, subject and object as she sings of her forbidden body, her proscribed desire. The play abandons linear chronology in favour of an oscillation between the present moment of struggle, and a series of flashbacks to the past, the time before the discovery of Oedipus's 'crime'. In these flashback scenes, both characters share a form of speech that tells of fluidity and exchange between 'you' and 'me', 'he' and 'she', between gender and subjective positions.

> O. Promets-moi que jamais d'autre amant que moi
> Moi seul ta force, ton enfant, moi
> ton père si tu veux, moi-même
> ton époux mère, ton amant
> Promets-moi jamais d'autre roi
> J. Toi ma vie mon jour, ma lumière, je te promets,
> Non, je ne te promets pas. Je veux que tu me demandes
> Encore, encore et chaque fois, dis-moi qui tu es pour moi. (p.67)

> [O. Promise me never another lover but me
> Me alone your strength, your child, me
> your father if you wish, myself
> your husband mother, your lover
> Promise me : never another king

J. You my life my day, my light, I promise you
No, I don't promise you. I want you to ask me
Again, again and each time, tell me who you are for me.][40]

Throughout the flashback scenes, what is achieved through the language is an interchangeability of names and social roles, so that words are emptied of their cultural significance, allowing them to become freely attributable. This is the realm of the Freudian pre-Oedipal phase, or the Lacanian Imaginary, which pre-dates, and is resistant to, the Law of the City. The embodied nature of the language shared by Jocasta and Oedipus in the early days of their love is striking – it is in the physical chambers of the heart, in the veins, that their love is lived, as if they share one body:

J.
Je te dis la mer, la mer, la mer
O.
Dès que tu prononces ce mot, je suis sur toi, contre toi, en toi, je
suis déferlé dans toi moi tout entier
Mais c'est en moi que toi, la mer toute entière est bercée [...]
O.
Je suis l'air. Je suis dans la chambre. C'est moi que tu respires [...]
J.
Être ton sang. Car c'est seulement là,
Dans la chair, dans les replis de la chambre
Que la douleur peut cesser. L'amour, se reposer.
O.
Aller où je ne suis plus moi. Je ne veux plus avoir de
nom. Pas d'autre nom que toi, pour toi. [...]
O.
Ce ciel n'est pas immobile, c'est la mer,

[40] This, and all subseqent translations of *Le Nom d'Oedipe*, are my own. I have followed the puncutation (or lack thereof) and lineation of the French text throughout.

Remonter chaque veine, suivre ton sang
à travers tous les temps, jusqu'à la première goutte.

(pp.68 -72)

[J. I say to you: the sea, the sea, the sea
O. As soon as you pronounce that word, I am on you, against you
in you, I am
unfurled in you me entirely
But it is in me that you, the whole sea is cradled […]
O. I am the air. I am in your chamber. It's me you're breathing […]
J. To be your blood. Because it's only there,
In the flesh, in the folds of the chamber
That pain can stop. Love, rest.
O. Go where I am no longer. I no longer wish to have a
Name. No name other than 'you', for you. […]
O. This sky is not still, it's the sea,
To go back through each vein, follow your blood
Through all time, to
the first drop.

In her essay on the play, Sandra Freeman comments that 'this is the profound knowledge of the flesh, recognition of flesh and flesh - Jocasta and Oedipus were one flesh before his birth, the bliss of recognition, the total fulfilment of reunion expressed in words which have become their private language should not be destroyed by another, less profound knowledge, the stories, the destinies imposed on them by society.'[41] The play stages Jocasta's battle with the restrictive power of naming, the binds that language places on the desiring body. Freeman suggests that 'unlike Oedipus, Jocasta cannot be confined by a noun',[42] and in her refusal of the incest taboo, she constitutes an enemy of society. Jocasta is also firmly rooted in the Symbolic, undermining language by redefining it, collapsing the system of binary oppositions on which it is founded. It is the fixity of words that she struggles with, their

41 Sandra Freeman, 'Bisexuality in Cixous's *Le Nom d'Oedipe*', *Theatre Research International*, Vol.23 No.3, Autumn 1998, pp.242-248 (244).
42 Ibid., p.245.

power to legislate and establish absolutes. However, she recognises her need to voice words - words that are mobile and porous, without any reifying qualities, whose meanings are constantly shifting:

> J.
> J'aurais voulu le délivrer des noms.
> Tous les noms qui se font prendre pour des dieux :
> Par feinte, par fraude, se font adorer.
> Obéir. Passer pour des êtres purs :
> Père, mère, vérité, vivre, tuer, faute, dette, épouse, vérité
> Mari, roi, origine, quel homme peut dire lequel il est?
> Ce sont les noms qui gouvernent.
> Je voulais le libérer. (p.56)
> [I wanted to free him from names.
> All the names that pass for gods :
> Get themselves adored, through pretence, through fraud.
> Get themselves obeyed. Pass for pure beings :
> Father, mother, truth, live, kill, fault, debt, wife, truth
> Husband, king, origin, what man can say which he is ?
> It is names that govern.
> I wanted to free him.]

The strategy of having each part played by two on-stage players contests any unity of identity, which is already seriously disturbed within the language of the text itself.

In this play, Cixous is clearly using the stage to explore the dream of a way of being in language that would operate according to the conditions of the self in breath and voice: that would not be based on a division of *one* into two halves, subject and object, but rather, of exchange or sharing of something - life, breath, subjectivity - between two subjects. What is shared sustains each subject equally, but is not visible, cannot be dominated, possessed or appropriated. The mobility of gender and identity that the text performs, combined with temporal confusion arising from the fact that the scenes of the play are not presented in linear time sequence, but rather, shift constantly between present, near past and more distant

past, and the combination of song and voiced text, all create the potential for a complex performance that does indeed draw attention to the auditory dimension. Tiresias, who features in the later part of the play, remarks that the love between Jocasta and Oedipus is an affair of voices and breath, speaking and listening. The play is set in the intimate, enclosed chamber where the lovers are distant from the demands and constraints of social organization, and it presents a powerful dramatisation of the encroaching pressure of the clamorous city on this secluded - auditory - space:

> T. J'entends leurs voix se trouver, leurs souffles se caresser, se fuir s'écouter. (p.67)
> [T. I hear their voices finding each other, their breaths caressing, running from each other, listening to each other.]

The figure of Jocasta, and the love she offers Oedipus, appears to represent the plenitude of the pre-Oedipal phase - marked by instinct, drives and rhythm, the body lived through sound - carried over into the Symbolic, with the consequent loosening of symbolic ties and taboos. If gender identities and the family (and beyond that, patriarchal society at large) are founded on the repression of the desire of and for the mother, and the incest taboo, then Cixous's re-reading of the Oedipus myth, which places a mother at its centre, attempts to open a space for new ways of living the relationship between bodies and words.The fact that Jocasta loses her life when Oedipus leaves her to answer the demands of the city places her dream of an alternative subjective economy in the realm of the utopian. For Jean Genet, theatre was a space of death, a place where people could approach death in life - where the void underpinning the image could be uncovered and touched.[43] For Cixous, too, it seems that theatre is a place of transcendence of the limits of representation, where the living and the dead can meet. *Le Nom d'Oedipe* ends with a fusion of the dead Jocasta and the living Oedipus in the person of Oedipus, who has transcended the male/female opposition and become an androgynous manifestation of both lovers - although what he appears to experience at the play's end could also be seen to represent a kind of living death, a return to pre-Oedipal asubjectivity in the fusion of male and female.

[43] See in particular Jean Genet, 'LEtrange mot d'u…', *Tel Quel* 30 (1967), reprinted in *Oeuvres Complètes* Tome IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), pp.9-18.

In 'Le Rire de la Méduse', Cixous envisions a 'new love' that would desire the other as other, as subject, rather than as a reflection or part of the self - a form of alterity that would require a radical change in the desiring economy, and consequent changes in discourse and systems of representation based on scopic separation of subject and object. *Le Nom d'Oedipe* seems to posit a return to pre-Oedipal fusion - based in auditory and tactile experience - as a solution to the divisions and oppositions of an economy founded on the loss of the (primary) object. Sandra Freeman comments that 'the elimination of the father, the ascendence of the mother are not the triumph of the female sex over the male, they are the victory of freedom to express the never ending possibilities of human life over the authority which imposes restrictive boundaries.' Luce Irigaray wrote of the psychoanalytical profession's attitude to the subject's relationship with its archaic home of flesh in flesh:

> Ce moment premier est assez mal vu - il est d'ailleurs invisible - des psychanalystes. Situation ou régression foetales, disent-ils, sur lesquelles il ne peut être dit grand-chose. Un interdit plane. Il y aurait là risque de fusion, de mort, de sommeil létal, si le père ne venait pas trancher ce lien trop étroit avec la matrice originelle. Mettant, à la place, la matrice de sa langue ? [...] Ainsi, l'ouverture de la mère, l'ouverture à la mère, apparaissent comme menaces de contagion, de contamination, d'engouffrement dans la maladie, la folie, la mort.
>
> Luce Irigaray, 'Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère'[44]

> [Psychoanalysts take a dim view of this first moment – and, besides, it is invisible. A fœtal situation or fœtal regression, they say, and there is not a lot to be said about that. A taboo is in the air. If the father did not sever this over-intimate bond with the primal womb, there might be the danger of fusion, of death, of the sleep of death. Putting the matrix of language in its place ? […] And so, the openness of the mother, the opening to the mother, appear to threaten contagion, contamination, engulfment in illness, madness and death.][45]

[44] Luce Irigaray, 'Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère', in *Sexes et Parentés* (Paris: Minuit, 1987), pp.21-33 (26-27).
[45] 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother', translated by David Macey in *The Irigaray Reader*, edited by Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991, pp.34-46 (39).

For Irigaray, the repression of the desire of the mother in Western culture – of the child's desire for the mother and of the mother's own desire – is the founding repression which has resulted in a critical imbalance: the projection of lack, death-drive and madness/hysteria onto women, who 'carry' these dimensions of human life on behalf of both sexes. According to this view, a loosening of the prohibitions and taboos attached to the early relationship with the mother's body would result in a re-balancing of the woman's position within culture – the de-objectification of the mother, the freeing of a range of subjective postions for women, deliverance of women from negative projections, positive and autonomous representations within culture of female sexuality and of the woman's relation to her place of origin. Only when this happens, according to Irigaray, will there be true reciprocity between sexuate adults 'capable d'érotisme et de réciprocité dans la chair.'(29) [capable of eroticism and reciprocity in the flesh. (42)] A fruitful reading of Cixous's *Le Nom d'Oedipe* would, in my view, highlight the constant movement in/between the order of language and dreams of whatever might lie beyond/outside the Symbolic:

> *L'Amour Autre:* Aux commencements sont nos differences. Le nouvel amour ose l'autre, le veut, s'emble en vols vertigineux entre connaissance et invention.
>
> 'Le Rire de la Meduse' (67)
>
> *Other love.* In the beginning are our differences. The new love dares the other, wants the other, makes dizzying, precipitous flights between knowledge and invention. (263)

As she set out on her theatrical journey, Cixous would seem to have been motivated by a desire to create a form of theatre that would be characterised by a destabilising of positions of knowledge, and a poetic re-working of language that would open a space for 'flights' – endless *movement between* knowledge and invention, between word and body. This space of movement, according to Guy Rosolato, is the space of the voice[46], and with *Le Nom d'Oedipe*, it would seem that Cixous was setting out to realise the aim declared in her polemical essay 'Aller à la mer': to create a theatre of the voice and the auditory that would give voice to 'the

[46] See Guy Rosolato, 'La Voix: entre corps et langage'.

feminine', to that which has been silenced by culture, that which culture has been unwilling or unable to hear. *Le Nom d'Oedipe* is radical in that it presents on the stage an intimation of what 'the disintegrated, libidinized, pulsive self argued for by Lyotard, Kristeva, Barthes and others'[47] might sound like. Attendance at a performance of this play would surely be an extraordinary experience of the sound of spoken and sung words, untethered from the rules of tense, gender and syntax, but still making sense of the longing of bodies for bodies, and ultimately, the importance of flights of invention in the face of the destructive power of naming. Cixous's play demonstrates that a new way of being in language is indissociable from new ways of being in bodies, new subjectivities.

Set in semi-darkness in the enclosed setting of Jocasta's chamber, the spectator is immersed in a torrent of words that tell/sing of the forbidden body. The exchange of live voices between the bodies on the stage is central to the play's meaning: the lovers constantly ask each other to *say*, to speak time, space and body; Jocasta ultimately dies because Oedipus has stopped speaking to her, has deprived her of the sound of his voice. Silence is the central metaphor of Jocasta's final speeches. Her death is described as an enforeced silence, a final loss of voice. Through the rejection of the mother, and her dereliction, her relegation to a postion of lack or silence, the son claims his name, his identity, and the law of the City is upheld. In *Le Nom D'Oedipe*, Cixous certainly appears to have set out in the direction of a form of theatre that would privilege voice and the auditory in order to open a space where new forms of subjectivity might be invented/imagined in the ruins of grammatical structure, syntax and temporal linearity. The play calls for spectators to be attentive to what might be revealed in the spaces between words and things. The question which the play raises, then, is simply whether she would continue to develop a form of theatre that would perform creative deformations of linguistic and subjective structures in the space of the voice.

In the 1980s, Cixous's development as a writer for the stage took an important turn; the determining factor was her encounter with Ariane Mnouchkine and her Théâtre du Soleil. Mnouchkine, whose theatre collective has been creating highly influential theatre works since the 1960s, is now recognised as one of the leading directors in France. This encounter seems to have had a crucial impact on Cixous's understanding of theatre, and of the requirements it places on the writer. In the mid-to-late eighties, she wrote two epics

[47] Steven Connor, 'The Modern Auditory I', p.220.

modelled on the Shakespearean history plays, for performance by the Théâtre du Soleil: *L'Histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, Roi du Cambodge*[48], and *L'Indiade ou L'Inde de leurs rêves.*[49] Cixous has recounted how her collaboration with the troupe developed:

> My last two plays were written in conjunction with the Théâtre du Soleil, and this had a strong determining influence on the writing of the texts. In each case Ariane Mnouchkine [...] and I lived through a period of latency in which we discussed a number of different possibilities, searching for a theme which would correspond to the needs of the Théâtre du Soleil and provide sufficient energy and inspiration for me. In both cases a number of hypotheses presented themselves and were rejected by either me or Ariane.[50]

Other interviews reveal that all her subsequent work with the Théâtre du Soleil has followed a similar pattern. In joining forces with Mnouchkine, Cixous had engaged in a theatrical quest to 'faire jaillir le sang du coeur de notre époque'[51][to make the blood spring from the heart of our era], to locate issues and themes that would enable them to create theatrical parables for the modern world. This task often involves Cixous in laborious historical reasearch as a prelude to writing in her now preferred mode for the theatre, the epic:

> J'ai toujours pensé que l'Histoire ne pouvait être traitée que poétiquement dans le texte [...], qu'elle devait être chantée, qu'elle devait être une épopée comme l'Iliade [...]. Mais est-ce que l'épopée a encore droit de cité aujourd'hui? Au théâtre oui. C'est encore un

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48 Hélène Cixous, *L'Histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, Roi du Cambodge* (Paris: Théâtre du Soleil, 1985).

49 Hélène Cixous *L'Indiade ou L'Inde de leurs rêves* (Paris: Théâtre du Soleil, 1987).

50 Hélène Cixous, 'A Realm of Characters' an interview given in English and published in *Delighting the Heart: A Notebook by Women Writers*, ed. Susan Sellers (London: The Women's Press, 1989), pp.126-128 (127).

51 Hélène Cixous in interview with Armelle Heliot, 'Mesguich-Mnouchkine: génération Cixous', *Le Quotidien*, 9 May 1994, p.17.

> lieu où il y a de l'épopée, où il y a encore ce que l'on pourrait appeler de la légende.[52]
>
> [I always thought that History could only be treated poetically in the text […], that it had to be sung, that it had to be an epic, like the Ilyiad […]. But is there still a place for epic today? In the theatre, yes. It's still a place where there is epic, where there is still what we might call legend.]

Thus, the project that began to emerge from her collaboration with Mnouchkine was to develop a form of theatre that would recount history in poetic terms with a view to making visible the links between past and present, to making audiences understand the influence of their socio-cultural heritage. It was at this point that Cixous began to see the theatre's potential for delivering ethico-poetic messages and effecting societal change - a view which is very much in harmony with Mnouchkine's theatrical aesthetics. However, the opportunity to work with a successful troupe, with guaranteed exposure of her plays to large audiences, not just in France but elsewhere in Europe, seems to have placed Cixous under certain constraints and pressures:

> When I write fiction, I let my meaning gather slowly, I give my reader as long as she needs to understand. In the theatre, my writing must be efficient, there must be an immediate explosion of meaning [...]. Theatre is the art of urgency [...]. When I write, [...] I write without worrying about time. […] Then, as rehearsals get under way, I cut. [...]. The original version is always at least one and a half times as long as the version which is published.[53]

One might infer from this that Cixous's work with the Théâtre du Soleil has been marked, to some extent, by an adaptation on her part to the troupe's working methods of improvisation

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[52] Hélène Cixous, 'De la scène de l'Inconscient à la scene de l'Histoire' in *Hélène Cixous: Chemins d'une écriture*, ed. Françoise van Rossum-Guyon and Miriam Diaz-Diocaretz (Paris:Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1990), pp.15-34 (28).

[53] Hélène Cixous,'A Realm of Characters', interview given in English, op.cit., pp.126, 128.

and collective creation. And while in the 1980s, she may have viewed her work with this group as an 'apprenticeship' in theatre, the late 90s found the Théâtre du Soleil performing a script which is described as having been produced 'en harmonie avec Hélène Cixous'[54] [in harmony with Hélène Cixous]. One must wonder what effect the notion that writing for the theatre 'must be efficient' is likely to have on a writer who describes the process of writing as listening, 'with all the ears of my body' to 'the inkling of a thought which is in the process of unravelling itself in front of me [...], trying to hear all its minute gradations as it works itself out.'[55] Cixous's poetic writing bears witness to a struggle to give voice to that which lies outside, and which is resistant to, the controlling authority of normative linguistic and socio-cultural constraints. As suggested above, at a certain point in her career as a writer for the theatre, she began to express a desire to explore contemporary socio-political issues. This move is not necessarily incompatible with her earlier work, which was always concerned to explore the political, as well as the personal, dimension of gender and sexual politics. However, she does appear to have become increasingly impressed by the public occasion that is the theatrical performance, by what it represents in terms of a marshalling of human energies and bodies: in an interview given in 1989, she stated that she did not believe that 'we can mobilise people in order to recount platitudes',[56] while in another interview she stated that the playwright's relationship with the public is one of responsibility - theatre is too important an occasion to be wasted:

> Le théâtre, c'est le rapport au public... (l'occasion de) faire venir mes proches, mes voisins... et de discuter avec eux. Autrement, c'est pas la peine... je ne vois pas pourquoi on mobiliserait une armée pour rien.[57]
>
> [Theatre is about the rapport with the audience… (the occasion) to invite those close to me, my neighbours… and to discuss with them.

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[54] *Et Soudain des Nuits d'Éveil,* le Théâtre du Soleil, 1997, 'création collective en harmonie avec Hélène Cixous', unpublished.

55 Hélène Cixous, 'Listening to the Truth', an interview given in English, in *Delighting the Heart*, p.69.

56 Hélène Cixous, 'A Realm of Characters', in *Delighting the Heart*, p.127.

57 Hélène Cixous, in an interview I conducted with her in Paris, 26 October 1996.

> Otherwise, there is no point… I don't see why one would mobilise an army for nothing.]

To some extent, then, Cixous views the theatrical forum as a space of duty and obligation ('On ne peut pas ne pas être convoqué par une obligation de fidélité')[58]: the obligation to communicate an ethical message, to bear witness to society's ills, to rehearse other possibilities, to re-think contemporary socio-political realities. The stage affords the writer the possibility of amplifying her voice in the immediacy and urgency of the present moment of theatrical performance, and thus, of communicating, in a visceral way, 'truths' concerning the actuality of the contemporary world ('Au théâtre, il faut inventer les masques du cri' [In theatre, you have to invent masks for the cry]).[59] Consideration of Cixous's major play from the 1990s gives some insight into the conjunction of her desire to stage History – to represent heretofore untold stories of resistance to social injustice – and her objective of giving voice to the proscribed female body.

La Ville parjure ou le réveil des Erinyes[60] [*The Perjured City, or The Awakening of the Furies*] was first performed by the Théâtre du Soleil, under the direction of Mnouchkine, at their base in the Cartoucherie theatre in Vincennes on 18 May 1994. The production was the most recent in a series of collaborations between Cixous and the company. The play is epic in its proportions, with twenty-two scenes, a cast of some fifty actors, a running time of eight hours and a time-scale that appears to span five thousand years: the programme indicates that the events of the play take place 'entre 3500 ans avant J.C. et l'année 1993'[61] [between 3500 B.C. and 1993]. Its form is that of a lengthy narrative in verse, shaped in a linear sequence of scenes, most of which stage conflictual duologues. In 1992, Cixous translated Aeschylus's *Eumenides* for the Theatre du Soleil's production *Les Atrides*, based on the *Oresteia*. The *Eumenides* was of interest to Cixous for its dramatisation of the establishment of the patriarchal principle, the institution of the law of the City, and the encryptment of maternal anger. The banished Furies, carrying the last vestiges of a primitive order with them

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[58] Hélène Cixous, 'De la scène de l'Inconscient à la scène de l'Histoire', p.27.
[59] Hélène Cixous, in interview with M. Noonan, Paris, 26 October 1996.
[60] Hélène Cixous, *La Ville parjure, ou le réveil des Erinyes* (Paris: Théâtre du Soleil,1995).
[61] ibid., p.8.

to the underworld, appealed to her imagination as symbols of all that is repressed in the myth of origins. Cixous concludes the preface to her translation with a reference to a forgotten voice in Aeschylus's drama: 'Une femme égorgée poussait des cris terribles, je ne me souviens pas, est-ce que tu te souviens?'[62][a woman with her throad cut cried terrible cries, I don't remember. Do you remember?] *La Ville parjure* opens with an anguished mother's cry, re-voicing Clytemnestra's stifled call for justice and providing a sense of continuity between the two texts. The blood spilt in Aeschylus's drama overflows into Cixous's play, which is prefaced with the following lines from the *Eumenides*:

> Le sang, une fois sur le sol
> Il est bien difficile de le faire remonter, popoi!
> Le rapide liquide qui est versé à terre s'en va! (p.5)
> [Once the blood is on the ground,
> It is quite difficult to bring it back up, popoi!
> The quick liquid spilled to the ground runs away!][63]

The central character, La Mère, is fleeing the city, site of treachery and murder. Cixous set the play in a cemetery somewhere on the outskirts of an unnamed city - she aimed to create a space that would be redolent of the Greek city, the polis, but which would also speak of the modern city - 'ces cités qui se considèrent comme lumière et utilisent le mot éthique tous les jours.'[64] Her two children have died at the hands of the city's carers, who, it appears, have transfused them with blood contaminated with a lethal virus; the State and the medical and legal professions have denied responsibility. French audiences would immediately have recognized a very real and on-going French drama - 'l'affaire du sang contaminé' [the contaminated blood case] – a protracted court-case which resulted in the conviction of a number of eminent doctors for having knowingly authorized the use of contaminated blood products. The case was a source of embarrassment for the Mitterrand government in the

[62] Preface to *Les Eumenides*, translated by Hélène Cixous (Paris:Théâtre du Soleil, 1992).
[63] *The Perjured City, or The Awakening of the Furies*, translated by Bernadette Fort , in *Selected Plays of Hélène Cixous* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2004), pp.89-190 (89).
[64] Interview with Hélène Cixous in *Le Quotidien*, 9 May 1994, p.17.

early 1990s. The play therefore explored issues that were absolutely current in the society in which it was staged.

In Mnouchkine's 1994 production, layers of crumbling, dusty, alveolar cells were banked around a vast empty central playing space, enclosed at the back by high, black iron gates: necropolis, amphitheatre. The mother seeks refuge in this place, where the spirits of the dead mingle with the half-dead, a band of homeless outcasts from the city. This group constitutes the play's Chorus. The spatial and temporal settings of *La Ville parjure* elide the contemporary and the mythical, in a space that recalls all the kingdoms of fairy-tale and myth, as well as contemporary France. The Mother, fleeing the city where her children have been murdered, goes to the liminal cemetery, guarded by a female Aeschylus and protected by the goddess Night, where the dead mingle with the half-dead:

LA MÈRE

> J'ai de la malédiction pour toi aussi,
> Royaume totalement hanté par des docteurs éminents
> Qui sont des loups vêtus de blanc. [...]
> L'empire est aux bêtes. (pp.12-13)
> [THE MOTHER. I have a curse for you too,
> Kingdom haunted by eminent doctors,
> Wolves dressed in white. […]
> The empire belongs to the beasts. (91-92)]

Her rage at the murder of her children wakens the Furies - *les Erinyes* - ancient protectresses of the maternal principle, incarcerated deep in the earth at the inception of democracy. Their return coincides with the flight of the gods of truth and honour from the land, a time when market principles have de-centred humanitarian values. In this place, where men can no longer feel pity or terror, where there are no more tears, no more dreams, the Mother is the voice of resistance to the beast of cynicism and the defender of a lingering hope. The text presents her as little more than a shadow, a breath:

LA MÈRE

J'ai tout dépensé, brûlé, je ne suis plus que dette.
Tout pour payer la rançon de la Vérité. (p.32)
[THE MOTHER. I spent everything, burned everything,
To pay the ransom of Truth, and I never saw it appear.
I'm nothing but debt. (99)]

Mnouchkine's production presented a small woman dwarfed by the vastness of the stage – yet her rage and passion are enough to cause the city's repressive forces to mobilize against her, and to convince her own cohorts to stand firm in the face of attack and almost certain death. Thus, in Cixous's text, La Mère is a strong image for resistance, one of the central Cixousian themes: she is a 'freedom fighter', 'une trompette rebelle' (p.14) [a rebel trumpet (93)], operating outside the city's walls – little more than a cry or voice, but with the power to bring the walls down. The dissenting woman is menacingly Other in the context of a world governed by patriarchal values. As the play moves forward what emerges is an image of two opposing economies, one rooted in the values of the market-place and motivated by fear – fear of loss of subjective control, fear of destruction of the ego – the other rooted in a fearless resistance to the corruption of humanitarian values and an openness to the disruptive power of grief.

The drama is orchestrated around a central trial scene. This provides another strong link with Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, in which Athena establishes the power of the judicial court based on the democratic vote of the elders within the Greek city. The law of the democratic state is put on trial in *La Ville parjure*. In the course of the trial scene, the Mother claims retribution in the form of a single word - 'Pardon' - a simple expression of remorse on the part of the accused doctors. The accused refuse, pleading innocence, claiming that they were simply pawns in a political game: the impossible word separates two worlds. According to the Mother, the voicing of this word would have the power to open the floodgates of 'grace' and to dissolve conflict; the Furies, who are incensed at the Mother's lack of desire for a bloody revenge, claim that the word has the power to overturn the established order :

LES ERINYES

Toi, ce mot-là, ne le dis pas
Car, si tu le disais, tu aurais aboli
En un souffle, l'ordre des choses. (p.121)
[FURIES. You, don't say those words
For if you said them, you'd abolish
The order of things in one breath. (142)]

The central debate is left somewhat in suspension as the play proceeds, as the issue of trial and judgement is abandoned in favour of a change in plot direction: the city's elections place a new regime in power and the cemetery's inhabitants are destroyed by the deliberate opening of a nearby dam, which results in the flooding of their space. The post-diluvian scene that constitutes the play's ending, is set somewhere beyond the earth. The drowned - the mother and her band of outcasts – have been washed onto the shores of 'le pays au-delà des pays' {the country beyond countries], where they exult in their relief and joy at having been released from the scene of conflict. Thus, the opposition between what could be described as 'masculine' or patriarchal and 'feminine-maternal' economies in the context of the Cixousian oeuvre, is not resolved within the scene of interaction between the two economies.

Cixous's text establishes the maternal principle: an openness to the power of grace, a willingness to feel and to mourn, the capacity to imagine and to dream, to have hope for a better future, the desire to know truth and justice. Mnouchkine's staging aimed to make the audience feel this range of emotions, to break down its cynical resistance, to move it to acquiesce, albeit momentarily and possibly involuntarily, in the utopian alternative that is offered through the play's seemingly binary process. Julie Brock described the setting in Mnouchkine's original production as follows:

> Au commencement, le symbolisme saisissant de la mise en scène nous conduit dans la zone mythique de notre mémoire. L'imaginaire se construit de niches d'argile, anciens tombeaux devenus la demeure des sans-logis. Surgit la gardienne du cimetière, le

> personnage d'Eschyle. Dans sa fonction symbolique, elle est gardienne de notre mémoire.[65]
>
> [At the start, the forceful symbolism of the staging leads us into the mythical zone of our memory. The imaginary is made of clay recesses, ancient tombs which have become the dwellings of the homeless. The female guardian of the cemetery emerges, the character Aeschylus. In her symbolic function, she is the guardian of our memory.]

In her staging, Mnouchkine is responding to Cixous's text, which re-appropriates the archaic maternal territory in its initial images, and proceeds to open the way for a return to the nocturnal, oneiric locus of the final scene, represented as a place of mystery and creativity - mother-space:

LE CHOEUR

> Quand vous arriverez ici vous verrez: c'est une très
> noble éblouissante réjouissante splendide joyeuse
> grande magnificente dame vivante. (p.217)
> [CHORUS. When you arrive here you will see:
> She is a very noble dazzling rejoicing splendid
> Joyous grand magnificent living lady. (181)]

At one level, the play is clearly a response to Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, in which the establishment of the principle of the importance of male life above the life of women forms the basis for the establishment of the city-state. However, the literalism of Mnouchkine's focus on the emotional reality of the mother-child bond seemed to anchor the production too firmly in the contemporary reality to which the play refers. This focus, combined with the play's didactic import – the exhortation to the audience to rebel against socio-political structures that allow such scandals as the contaminated blood scandal to occur, is stated in very concrete terms at the end of the play – limited the text's poetic potential to operate at

[65] Julie Brock, 'Un regard sur *La Ville Parjure'*, *Theatre/Public* 121, 1995, pp.46-48 (47).

several levels, to move in the in-between of the unconscious and the real, the personal and the social/historic. It also made it more difficult for an audience to experience the progress of the play as that of movement from a patriarchal economy to a 'feminine' economy, rather than a Manichean reinforcement of male-female binarism and self-other agon. Subtle suggestions of fluidity of gender among the band of 'sans identité' were simply not enough to counteract the power of the production's central images.

Much has been written of Cixous's project for the elaboration of a feminine economy in her writing, one that is based on fluidity, plurality, and above all, exchange and movement between differences. For example, Mairead Hanrahan writing of Cixous's fictional work *Dedans*, notes that in this text Cixous represents difference as movement:'she introduces a subject characterised by the affirmation of otherness, rather than by its appropriation and control.'[66] Writing of the *Indiade* and *Sihanouk*, Cixous's plays from the 1980s dealing with recent Indian and Cambodian history, Morag Shiach asserts that Cixous explores the construction of new forms of identity in these plays. According to Shiach, Cixous has argued that theatre is uniquely placed to construct such identities, which do not repeat the dominant hierarchical system of difference.[67] In a text entitled *Le Chemin de légende*, written in 1984, Cixous indeed develops her concept of theatre as a place where people - men, women, actors, spectators - can divest themselves of the armour of socially-constructed roles and identities in order to rediscover themselves in a world of wonder, contingency and reciprocity:

> Au théâtre le public n'en sait pas plus que le personnage sur lui-même. Personne ne précède. Ensemble, on hésite. Cela crée entre tous l'obscure et frémissante complicité archaïque. On avance en

66 Mairead Hanrahan, 'Hélène Cixous's *Dedans*: The Father Makes an Exit', in *Contemporary French Fiction by Women*, ed. Margaret Atack and Phil Powrie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp.151-62 (159).

67 Morag Shiach, 'Their symbolic exists, it holds power - we, the sowers of disorder, know it only too well' in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed., Teresa Brennan (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.153-167 (165).

> tâtonnant dans le noir, en écoutant les bruits de l'Histoire, du coeur, de la fôret, en se donnant la main.[68]
>
> [In theatre, the audience doesn't know any more about themselves than the character knows about himself. Together, we hesitate. That creates, among us all, the archaic and trembling archaic complicity. We advance, feeling our way in the dark, listening to the noises of History, of the heart, of the forest, taking each other by the hand.]

With its originary source in primitive myth and ritual, theatre, Cixous seems to suggest, is the place of confluence of history and the unconscious, the personal and the public, where the self can share in a community that is inclusive, that does not depend for its survival on the exclusion or repression of part of its membership. This utopian, non-exclusionary space of exchange between differences has always been represented as the space of maternal-feminine writing in the Cixousian poetics.[69]

In what ways could *La Ville parjure* be said to represent an evolutionary step in Cixous's project for a 'maternal-feminine' theatre, for a staging of 'cette scène-corps'[70] [that stage-body] envisaged by her in 1977? Formally, the play is not unconventional: there is no dislocation of the various stage languages (voice, gesture, movement, sound, lighting, recorded material, physical presence/absence) in relation to each other. Neither is there any attempt to question or dismantle gender, identity or other manifestations of representation. Cixous's early plays –*Portrait de Dora* (1976) and *Le Nom d'Oedipe* (1978) – are formally complex. In these plays, the aim is clearly to present the marginalization of the female subject and the possibility of subversion of the self-other opposition by means of a formal undermining of theatrical convention. The text of *La Ville parjure* offers less opportunity for exploration of fluidity of character, disjunction of voice and movement, displacement of

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[68] Hélène Cixous, 'Le Chemin de légende' in *Théâtre: Portrait de Dora et La Prise de Madhubaï* (Paris: des femmes, 1986), pp.7-10 (10).

[69] Foremost among Cixous's early poetico-theoretical works on the links between the maternal and writing are: 'Sorties' in *La Jeune née*, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément (Paris: Union Générale D'Editions, 1975); 'Le Rire de la Meduse' *L'Arc* 61 (1975), pp.39-54; *La Venue à l'écriture* (Paris: Union Générale D'Editions, 1977); *Entre l'ecriture* (Paris: des femmes. 1986).

[70] Cixous, 'Aller a la mer', *Le Monde*, 28 April 1977, p.19.

setting, interruption of time sequence - some of the techniques used in productions of the earlier plays, most notably in Simone Benmussa's 1976 production of *Portrait de Dora*[71] – to bring about a level of Brechtian denaturalization of accepted ideologies and to expose the mechanisms of representation.

This play's meaning resides in the power of metaphor to move the audience. In the verse itself, syntax is firmly in place. Although the Mother's words speak of resistance and rebellion, there is no evidence here of writing that is formally subversive; the text 'talks about' transgression, but it does not enact a blowing-up of the laws of language and form, what Cixous once referred to as a blazing of the woman's trail in the symbolic.[72] The well-organized verse of *La Ville parjure* does not appear to demonstrate the playful re-working of language evident in Cixous's fictional work, or in the earlier plays, such as *Le Nom d'Oedipe*. This lengthy verse play would appear to want to place the classical text centre-stage, rather than to explore the transformative possibilities of the conjunction of the voiced (woman's) body and the stage. The city of *La Ville parjure*, for example, is clearly a metaphoric site, signalling the democratic state as it has developed in history, while theatre is *l'anti-ville*, *l'anti-cité*, located at the city's gates, outside. It is in the extra-mural space that an ephemeral community gathers 'pour refuser la répétition mortelle qu'il y a dans la ville, et penser les lignes de fuite, ou les impasses.'[73] [to refuse the mortal repetition there is in the city, and to think through the lines of escape, or the impasses.]

In her book on Cixous's theatre, Julia Dobson makes the point that a number of characters in Cixous's plays represent or are strongly associated with the poet-figure. Dobson argues compellingly that in the plays of the 1990s, it is the writing process itself that is being dramatised – a play such as *L'Histoire (qu'on ne connaitra jamais)* for example, 'explores the relationship between writing and theatre' (129), where poetic identity, represented by the central protagonist Snorri Sturlusson, is 'characterised by an affinity with the exiled, an openness to the other and a willingness to renounce the desire for authorial omniscience.' (135) While *La Ville parjure* does not deal in an overt way with writers and writing, the text

[71] For Benmussa's description of the staging techniques she used for this production, see her Introduction to Simone Benmussa, *Benmussa Directs* (London: John Calder, 1979), pp.9-19. This text has not been published in French.

[72] Hélène Cixous, 'Le Rire de la Méduse', p.49.

[73] My interview with the author, op.cit.

clearly inscribes the Mother and her group of *sans-identité* within a wider community of writers and dissidents. The figure of Aeschylus, played by a woman in Mnouchkine's production, stands guard over the cemetery and writes the names of Steve Biko and Anne Frank on the cemetery walls; another character stumbles upon Shakespeare's grave. Dobson notes that the play's self-reflexive concern with the role of the poet serves to associate Cixous herself with this group of writers (128). However, while Aeschylus is certainly an important figure in the play, representing, as she does, the figure of the poet as guardian and guide, ultimately it is the Mother who gives voice to a form of consciousness that coincides with Cixous's conception of writing as an enabling space for communion of the living and the dead, writers and writerly readers. It is she who represents most forcefully Cixous's poetics, which is rooted at the intersection of the maternal and the poetic: space of resistance, of mourning, of invention of new worlds. Mother-love is described in this play as a form of human expression that is transcendent, able to resist the work of time - as are the classical texts of the tradition in which Cixous now locates herself as a writer for the stage. This recalls the representation of the maternal in *Le Nom d'Oedipe* as a space of birth, enabling the emergence of subjects who are not locked in opposition, but also as a space outside of linear or teleological time, where the past is made present, where there is no loss: 'elle est la nuit continue/Sans origine/Où ce qui a été ne se perd pas/Est en vie.'[74] [She is the continuous night/Without beginning/Where what has been is/without end.] Even in this early text, 'the maternal' is clearly inscribed as a trope for the process of feminine writing.

Therefore, metaphor is central to the workings of *La Ville parjure*: the text is freighted with metaphor, and the central themes - maternal nurture, loss, exile, death and mourning - appear to be tropes for the writing process as it is lived by the writer herself. To what extent are the recipients of this play enabled by the text to receive it at the metaphorical level at which it was conceived? The play presents the spectator with a number of striking images that might work at the imaginative level to evoke intimations of unconscious life, the place before memory, or pre-Oedipal time. The text affords many opportunities for staging a mythical space where the maternal-feminine intersects with the poetic; it is rich in suggestive and allusive potential, so that a spectator might apprehend both the dream of an alternative feminine-utopian economy, and the allegory of writing as resistance. The voice of the

74 Hélène Cixous, *Le Nom D'Oedipe*, op.cit., p.63.

mother-poet sings loudly through the text: voice of the prophet returned from the wilderness of the democratic state, goad to indignation and witness to the need for time to assimilate, to feel and to grieve. The play's setting in a liminal burial-ground presents a powerful stage image for the realm of the imagination, the place of death as source of memory and source of writing ('notre ruche aux cellules gorgées de rêve'(p.199) [our hive full of cells gorged with dreams (174)]). Cixous's extensive use of myth and metaphor has the potential to draw the play into the realm of poetry and allusion, a place where the audience might dream more fully of other lives and accept the paradise that may be hinted at, imagined – although it may not be possible to realize it, or even define it fully, in the here-and-now.

The text that is bequeathed to the audience at the end of *La Ville parjure* is 'une histoire au goût de larmes et de lait' (p.219) [a story tasting of tears and milk (183)], a text that establishes the superiority of the maternal-feminine economy. As already mentioned, Cixous clearly wished her play to be received as an ethico-poetic tragedy in the classical mode. However, the text's demonstration of the impossibility of resolving, from within the Symbolic, the binarism upon which patriarchy is based is perhaps the real tragedy staged here. The space where fluidity of identity and exchange between opposites might occur remains beyond the symbolic order: what the audience witnesses in the final scene is the Mother's embracing of her enforced withdrawal from engagement with the Other. Although the earlier plays, such as *Portrait de Dora* or *Le Nom D'Oedipe,* also establish the impossibility of sustaining a feminine-maternal way of being in self and in language, within the confines of the Symbolic as it is constructed at present, they nonetheless *perform* the dream of what other selves, and other ways of interacting might be like. In contrast, *La Ville Parjure,* the text of which does not deviate significantly from the conventions of classical poetic form, ends with the joyful withdrawal into silence of the proponents of an alternative way of being. An audience might receive this final return to a space of non-conflict as the recovery of a symbolic feminine economy, the realm of poetry, of melody, harmony, rhythm - to which men would also have access - were it not for the final on-stage image of a mother who has realized her fantasy of completion with her children in a place where there are no men. This literal expulsion of the Other is difficult to reconcile with a form of theatre that would overthrow binarisms and invent new forms of intersubjectivity.

In the essay 'De la scène de l'Inconscient à la scène de l'Histoire', referred to earlier, Cixous writes that theatre can provide her with the opportunity to realise what had been the project and aim of all her writing: to write the Other, to put the self aside, to undergo a process of 'démoïsation' through writing.[75] It is this 'desire to construct the self as Other' that Julia Dobson located in Cixous's theatre, which she reads as a manifestation of the writer's desire to represent her own (writerly) identity on the stage, so that 'the theatre thus functions simultaneously as a site of ethical and political engagement and a space in which Cixous can develop new models of difference and multiplicity.' (Dobson, 142). She charts Cixous's progress as a writer for the stage as a movement from staging historical figures such as Gandhi and Sihanouk, to staging the lives of actual poets, such as Akhmatova and Svetaeva[76], and finally, to the use of myth and saga as 'contexts in which better to assert Cixous's vision of the transcendent nature of poetic identity.'[77] Dobson goes on to conclude that Cixous's employment of theatre as metaphor for an ideal mode of writing is 'not wholly compatible with her perception of the role of the poet as moral narrator, a role which implies at least a degree of omniscience, a superior level of knowledge {…].' (138) The suggestion that Cixous's plays from the 1990s might be viewed as allegories for the role of the poet in contemporary culture, and for the poetic process, is nonetheless compelling. The 1994 play *L'Histoire (qu'on ne connaîtra jamais)*[78] stages a more overtly reflexive exploration of the role and fate of a writer, who becomes embroiled in his own tale to the extent that he becomes one of its characters. The play is based on the Niebelungen cycle of Icelandic sagas, and on the person of Snorri Sturlusson, a thirteenth-century poet who, according to Cixous, 'fut […] au XIIIè siècle, l'Homère de la Scandinavie. Il a sauvé le matériel poético-mythique et il était aussi engagé dans son temps, politique... Il servait le roi. Plus tard, il fut

75 Cixous, 'De la scène de l'Inconscient à la scène de l'Histoire', p.25.

76 The play *Voile noire, voile blanche* has been published in English, under the title: *Black Sail, White Sail*, originally translated by Catherine MacGillivray in New Literary History: a Journal of Theory and Interpretation, Vol. 25 (2), 1994, pp.219-354. Set in Stalin's Russia, it features the poet Anna Akhmatova and the writer Nadzhda Mandelshtam as central protagonists.

77 Julia Dobson, *Hélène Cixous and the Theatre: The Scene of Writing* ((Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), p.126. Further page references will be given in the body of the text.

78 Hélène Cixous, *L'Histoire (qu'on ne connaîtra jamais)* (Paris: des femmes, 1994).

assassiné.'[79] [was, in the 18th century, the Homer of Scandinavia. He saved the poetico-mythical material and he was also politically engaged… He served the king. Later, he was assassinated.] He was, therefore, a collector and recorder of the myths and legends of his country, and a political activist, who died perhaps for a cause, making him an ideal Cixousian model for the writer as guardian of the mytho-poesis of a race. Cixous places the poet-figure in the midst of the story of which he is the author, a version of the vengeful saga of Sigfried and Brunhild, more commonly known to Western audiences through Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. The play has many structural similarities with *La Ville parjure,* taking several hours of playing-time to stage twenty scenes and featuring twenty-five characters. The action moves between 'heaven', where the Nordic gods demand from the poet a satisfying tale of bloody revenge, to the forests of the Rhine, and Gunther and Brunhild's chateau. In fact, most of the play is staged in alternating scenes of interior (the chateau) and exterior (the forest), recalling the spatial organization of *La Ville parjure*, where 'inside' (the city) is associated with the patriarchal order of corruption of human values, and outside (the cemetery) is associated with freedom, creativity and imagination.

The play recounts the tale of the poet's efforts to record the 'truth' – although again, this may lead to some confusion, as what he is in fact recording is myth or saga. Ultimately, his quest is shown to be a failure, as by the end of scene 17, he declares that 'la scène qui s'est passée, personne ne l'écrira jamais' (p.154) [the scene that has just taken place, no-one will ever write it], and as he himself dies in scene 19, having 'renounced' his task and his destiny as poet. However, the *dénouement* (a word that is peculiarly inappropriate in this context) presents an interesting development, as the dead poet, having renounced the task of recording the story and having lost all narrative control, is shown to be free to enter the narrative more fully than before, and to do what he was hitherto unable to do: to persuade or convince the heroes to give up their desire for bloody revenge, thereby deflecting the expected bloodbath (which is presumably recorded in other versions of the tale). As Dobson has shown, this ending suggests a transition from closed fictional narrative to the narrative in process that theatre affords.[80] The death of the author heralds the birth of the *character*, and

[79] 'Mesguich-Mnouchkine: génération Cixous', interview with Armelle Heliot, in Le Quotidien, 9 May 1994, p.17.
[80] Dobson, *Hélène Cixous and the Theatre*, p.136.

his liberty, within the realm of the stage, to change everything, to fuse heaven and earth, past and present, into the moment of the voiced text.

In theatre, the past, which is the domain of narrative, gives way to the present – as Cixous says of the poet, Snorri, in her programme notes to this play, 'le passé, qui était son objet de désir, le cède au présent.`[81] [the past, which was his object of desire, gives way to the present]. Thus, the stage becomes the forum for an enactment of the poet's journey toward her true home, where she can be with her true friends and fellow-travellers, and the text becomes an interior-exterior space where limits can be transcended and paradise regained. Wilson suggests that the lost paradise that is the object of desire of Cixous's writing is more or less defined in her work as 'the domain of dream, of language and of writing' - effectively, the realm of the imagination, which is revealed to have the power to 'expand and extend the interior, to deny its enclosure, and to create spatial freedom.'[82] The notion of extensibility referred to by Wilson in relation to the fiction certainly makes an appearance at the end of both *La Ville parjure* and *L'Histoire*, where the characters appear to drift off into a timeless, spaceless afterworld. The ending of *L'Histoire* features a snow-drift in which the characters are subsumed, leaving only their voices, which tell of harmony, the end of worldly strife and suffering:

> VOIX DE SNORRI. Que tu es belle, neige de Brunhild, que tes vents sont généreux, tes larmes sont si douces sur les égarés, douces sur les oubliés [...]. (p.182)
> [VOICE OF SNORRI. How beautiful you are, snows of Brunhild, how generous your winds are, your tears are so soft on the lost, on the forgotten […].]

In most of the plays discussed here, the ending offers a death-space which is also a space of expansion and transcendence of bodily and worldly limits. Wilson suggests that Cixous's texts attempt to 'draw the reader within their confines, calling us to take up a privileged

[81] Cixous, programme notes for the 1994 production of *L`Histoire (qu'on ne connaîtra jamais)*, directed by Daniel Mesguich at the Théâtre de la Ville, Paris.
[82] Emma Wilson, *Sexuality and the Reading Encounte*r, p.108.

relation inside the text.[83] And while Dobson notes that the spatial uncertainty and temporal displacement that is a feature of the ending of a number of Cixous's plays from the 1990s may be indicative of tensions 'arising from wanting to assert the scale of contemporary tragedies, and wanting to present them as myth and legend'[84] (in an effort to universalise them) – one could argue that the plays end with a reminder to the spectator that what she has been involved in is a text: she has inhabited a performed reading of a text, and been transported to a place outside of space and time, space of the imagination. In Cixous's plays from the 1990s, the writer makes her presence felt at the end, in order to effect the transition back from the interior reading-space of the imagination to the 'real' world. The Cixousian mechanism to effect this transition appears to be to deliver a moral or ethical concluding statement, summarising the play's call for resistance to political corruption.

This is particularly evident in *Tambours sur la digue* (1999) [Drums on the Dam], written 'sous forme de pièce ancienne pour marionnettes jouée par des acteurs.'[85] [in the form of an ancient puppet-play, performed by actors.] In interview, Cixous suggests that on this occasion, Ariane Mnouchkine decided that the play would not deal directly with contemporary politics, as *La Ville Parjure* did, but would instead take as its premise an event that may or may not have happened in Asia – the flooding of a townland by corrupt rulers in order to protect a neighbouring town or city. This provides the metaphor for "the sickness of the kingdom" – what is "hurting us at this moment?"[86] Her text is set in ancient China, in a time that is indeterminate. Le Seigneur Khang rules over his kingdom in an absolutist fashion, and his indecision about the impending floods causes a blood-bath and subsequent catastrophe among his people. The choice he faces is whether to flood the city, in order to spare the countryside, or vice versa. Resistance to these plans is led by a woman, Duan, the daughter of Le Devin, the local seer or prophet. Duan leads a group of drummers to the hills outside the town, from where they plan to warn the peasants at the first sign of an attempt to break the levees, and flood the fields.

This play, as presented by the Théâtre du Soleil, had one extraordinary feature: each character was played as a puppet by the actor in question, and each pupper was accompanied

[83] ibid., p.104.
[84] Dobson, *Helene Cixous and the Theatre*, p.142.
[85] Helene Cixous, *Tambours sur la digue* (Paris: Theatre du Soleil, 1999).
[86] Helene Cixous, in interview with Eric Prenowitz, in Selected Plays of Helene Cixous, edited by Eric Prenowitz (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2004), pp.1-24 (20).

by a 'manipulateur', a second actor who moved the puppet-actor's body. This is a highly successful theatrical technique, as the inhabiting of the boundary between living and non-living has an uncanny effect on the audience. Mnouchkine and the company worked with the techniques of Japanese Noh drama when rehearsing, so that the movements of 'marionnette' and 'manipulateur' were rhythmical and perfectly timed. Visually, the play was very powerful, with huge swathes of rippling silk cloth used to suggest the rising waters of the flood. The final scenes take place on the dam, where all the main players are murdered in acts of treachery and betrayal, their bodies falling into the flood-waters. The play ends with the arrival of the puppet-master, Baï-Ju, who had been summoned by the Ruler. In an impressive *coup de théâtre*, the audience begins to notice that the bodies of the dead players are no longer life-size, but that a large number of puppets, each resembling one of the characters in the play, is floating on the water. Baï-Ju, the puppeteer, begins to gather them up. The actor-marionnettes have been replaced by actual marionnettes as the text makes its transition back out of the realm of the stage – realm of the imagination – to the everyday world of the auditorium. We have been watching a puppet play after all. The ambiguity inherent in the blurring of human body and marionnette throughout the play, but particularly at the end, is very effective in inducing some reflection on the relationship between representation and lived reality, causing the audience to reflect on the nature of the experience they have had in the course of the performance, and to consider the fact that they have been somewhere other than the world of everyday life.

Dobson refers to this as Cixous's 'most successful play ' (144), and while I would hesitate to agree, what Cixous has succeeded in producing here is a text that has the poetic cadences of an old folk tale, eminently suited to the form of the puppet-play. Cixous would undoubtedly have had Kleist's essay 'Uber das MarionnettenTheater'[87] in mind when writing her own 'texte d'accompagnement' for her play, entitled 'Le Théâtre surpris par les marionnettes' ['The Theatre Surprised by Puppets'], in which she reflects on the difficulties – and pleasures – caused, for both actor and spectator, by the splitting and doubling of voice and body in the figure of the marionnette. The puppet was interesting to Kleist because of

87 Heinrich von Kleist, Über das Marionnetten Theater' was first published in installments in the daily *Berliner Abendblätter*, December 12-15, 1810. 'On the Marionette Theatre', translated by Thomas G. Neumiller, *The Drama Review*, Volume 16, No.3, September 1972, pp.22-26.

the unselfconscious grace of its movements, which cannot be matched by the human actor. Cixous views the puppet as the ultimate metaphor:

> Soudain, nous sentons à pleurer que c'est nous: quand la figure est si eternelle et le corps si fragile qu'il ne peut pas se crisper sans se briser, c'est nous, la creature humaine environnée par les vents du temps, minuscule dans l'Histoire des Forces et des Pouvoirs […].[88]
>
> [Suddenly, as we cry, we realise that it's us: when the face is so eternal and the body so fragile that it cannot bend without breaking, it's us, the human creature surrounded by the winds of time, minuscule in the face of the History of Force and Power.]

Kleist's essay was very influential in Parisian theatre in the late 1800s[89], and the thinking behind it is very evident in Symbolist theatre and in the theatre of Alfred Jarry. The shift in the role of the actor from that of incarnation of a character to that of 'porte-parole' for the text is central to the strand of stylized theatre that developed in Europe throughout the twentieth century. No longer called upon to inhabit a character, the actor 'est condamné à se laisser traverser par une parole […]'[90] [obliged to allow himself to be traversed by spoken words]. Evidence of the impact of Kleist's view of the puppet as a pure form, liable to entice the imagination of the spectator, and to place the voiced text centre-stage can be seen in the theatres of Beckett, of Duras and in the case of *Tambours sur la Digue*, in the theatre of Cixous. The constriction of the role of the actor also confirms the aesthetic authority of the author, whose centrality is reflected in the puppeteer's manipulation of the puppet. However, this constriction does not imply any lessening of the skill required – in fact, the technical demands placed on the two actors working in tandem to represent a single character are exacting in the extreme. The movement of one body by a second,

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[88] Hélène Cixous, 'Le Théâtre surpris par les marionnettes', in *Tambours sur la digue* (Paris: Le Theatre du Soleil, 1999), pp.115-124 (120-121).
[89] See Kimberly Jannerone's essay 'Puppetry and Pataphysics: Populism and the Ubu Cycle', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Volume XVII, Number 3, August 2001, (pp.239-253) for an account of the impact of Kleist's essay on Parisian theatre, and on the status of the puppet in the smaller, 'art' theatres of the 1890s.
[90] Rykner, *Les Voies de la Création Théâtrale*, p.57.

'manipulating' body also has the potential to move the audience to an empathy with human vulnerability and dependency if executed correctly.

In her fiction, in her poetico-theoretical writing and in her early plays, Cixous's poetics are marked by word-play and attention to the sonorous quality of words, giving rise to what Wilson refers to as 'the very amorphous, metamorphosing quality of Cixous's language where the sounds of one word are quickly subsumed into those of another.'[91] This homophonic play on words is virtually absent from the later plays, as is the playful work on pronouns and verb tenses that is such a feature of her fiction and her early plays. However, she has clearly opted for metaphor – visual and textual – as her preferred means of creating 'dream writing' on the stage, and has adapted her writing to the playing style of the Théâtre du Soleil in order to create plays that are so long and so weighted with metaphor as to have a mesmeric or hallucinatory effect on an audience over several hours.[92] Cixous's early ambitions for her theatre, as set out in her manifesto, 'Aller à la mer', for example, centred on the desire to stage a woman's body and its relationship with language, and beyond that, to transcend the limitations of cultural representations of the feminine. However, as we have seen, her theatrical aims evolved over the years, especially following her encounter with Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil in the 1980s, so that the desire to 'faire surgir, faire jaillir le sang du coeur de notre époque. Parler de nous, aujourd'hui'[93][make the blood surge from the heart of our era. Talk about us, today] became central, as did her wish to create a form of theatre that would be an analogue for the creative process, where the spectator would leaves the contemporary world behind and enters the space of myth, of dream and of the collective cultural unconscious. Writing and reading are parallel creative activities, in the context of the resistant, witness-bearing texts from which Cixous draws inspiration, and which she writes herself:

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[91] Emma Wilson, *Sexuality and the Reading Encounte*r, op.cit., p.112.

[92] Asked in an interview why Théâtre du Soleil performances were so *long*, Ariane Mnouchkine replied that 'la magie a besoin d'un minimum de temps pour opérer. Quand on est embarqué, on s'en va.' - 'Ariane Mnouchkine: "Chaque spectacle est une conquête"', *Le Parisien*, 13 September 1999, p.XII.

[93] 'Mesguich-Mnouchkine: génération Cixous', interview with Armelle Heliot in *Le Quotidien*, 9 May 1994, p.17.

> Reading, which establishes another universe of light and dark to that of the outside world, and which is obviously the prolongation of the universe of writing. This happens in intimacy, where sunlight does not reign, reigned over by another light. – Hélène Cixous[94]

Cixous's later plays do have the potential for a powerful staging of the scene of the encounter with writing - albeit one in which the other is subsumed into the text by the writing self, whose authoritative voice dominates. However, the conflict between the secret, intimate and fundamentally unknowing act of creativity and the writer's felt obligation to use the theatrical occasion to represent the writer's role in communicating an essential ethical message in the public forum inevitably gives rise to unsettling ambiguities for the spectator. What may be finding expression in Cixous's later theatre, then, is the conflict between what she has called her 'two hands': 'I have one theatrical hand, and one fictional hand, and they are different. They are completely different processes.'[95] Her attempt to reconcile the two processes, to reconcile her desire to create a theatre of the writing self and her drive to stage the writer's role in the shaping of history takes shape on her stage in the form of a tension between the feminine mode, 'the realm of the possible',[96] and the binary mode, where the other is objectified as an 'other of the same'. Her early vision of a theatre where writing and voice would enmesh in the stage-space seems to have been deflected into a desire to use the resources afforded by her collaboration with a well-established theatre company and the powerful directorial skills of Mnouchkine to communicate an ethical message to the contemporary world through the classical modes of myth, allegory and epic.

Thus, her evolution as a writer for the stage could be described in terms of a movement away from the development of a subversive theatre of the voice, where her concern was to create texts that transferred the homophonic play of the fiction to the stage and that were sufficiently fragmented and experimental to allow time and space for hearing the *strangeness* of the words in her writerly garden, towards a theatre that aspires to the metaphorical power of classical theatre, appealing perhaps more to an inner eye and ear, and

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94 Hélène Cixous, 'The School of the Dead', in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p.23.
95 'A Realm of Characters', in *Delighting the Heart*, p.126.
96 Quoted in Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Cambridge:Polity Press, 1996), p.23.

ultimately to the specular realm of images, than to the auditory. The early plays are constructed according to a principle of volatility and interchange, enacted through a combination of linguistic disruption and scenic strategies such as instability of time, space and character, and doubling or disjunction of body and voice. This undermining of the structures of syntax in the context of volatile scenic conditions gives rise, in the early plays, to a placing of the strangeness of the voiced text centre-stage, enabling writer – and spectator – to explore what had heretofore been banished from logocentric discourse: the song of the forbidden body. The later plays do not effect a linguistic dismantling; the principles of waiting and listening for what might make itself heard in the in-between have been almost banished from the Cixousian stage. Instead, in collaboration with Le Théâtre du Soleil, she has created a sequence of powerful scenic metaphors for the writing process as rebellion and resistance, often effecting what Dobson refers to as ' a dazzling integration of the themes of artistic and political responsibility'. If the allegorization of contemporary history for the purposes of staging representations of poetic identity, and the pronounced directive or didactic note struck by some of the texts, sometimes appear to limit the plays' potential to take their full, metaphorical flight, these texts remain powerful blueprints for stagings of meditations on the role of the imagination, and ultimately, the reading encounter, in the contemporary world.