

# WORDS OF LIFE

## Hosting Postmodern Plenitude

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**W**HAT IS READING? FOR HÉLÈNE CIXOUS, the French feminist postmodernist thinker, 'to read is to make love by taking care of the other . . . to know how to read a book is a way of life' (RCL, p 128). It is with such a notion of reading that the spirituality of the postmodern begins. But reading is more than a notion; reading is a practice. To read is to act, to engage, to perform and be performed upon, not just to think. As you read an essay such as this, what you learn from it cannot be detached from the psychological, spiritual, and indeed utterly physical processes of encounter. To read involves a certain surrender to that which is other and unknown. To read is to entertain the stranger. To read, as we will come to understand, is to become a host, with all the conflicting connotations of that Latin and Old French word: enemy, parasite, entertainer, sacrificial victim and eucharistic element.

This essay deals with the themes of reading, the stranger and the text in postmodern thought, and brings out some implications for contemporary spirituality. It draws in particular on the work of Hélène Cixous, who was born in Algeria of a German mother into an ancient Mediterranean Jewish family, and whose work, marked by the experience of exile, explores the concept of textuality.<sup>1</sup> The spirituality of the postmodern arises from a reflection upon the enigma, the mystery of our intratextuality.

### *Intratextuality*

Postmodern thinkers reject the claim that we have immediate and simple access to what might be called 'nature', to a supposedly objective framework for reality. Their central notion of intratextuality reflects a conviction that words always refer to other words; there is no reality which exists independently of language. Moreover, our symbols, our schemes of knowledge, our representations of reality all issue from specific uses of discursive power: the particular ways in which individuals and institutions promote certain views of the world through the language they use.

Take, for example, the various ways in which we can use the word 'body': the physical body, the social body, the body of Christ, the

ecclesial body, the body of the text. We might well be tempted to see one of these usages as literal and proper, namely the physical body, and the other uses as metaphorical and derivative. Postmodern thinkers would not accept such a distinction. For them there is no 'proper' sense of the term 'body' which can be used to police and call to order other uses. Each use of the word 'body' is proper within its own context, and each particular context relates to the others; all we can say is that the various different uses are interrelated, both similar to and different from each other, without any one of them taking priority. Thus we have an indefinite field of linked signifiers, with nothing beyond it. 'Intratextuality' is the name for this field, a symbolic field endlessly produced and productive. Moreover, our representations of reality are continually in motion, reflecting the passage of time and the shifts in power-relations.<sup>2</sup>

For postmodern thinkers the literal *is* the figurative. The world is an allegory. Reading and writing become the paramount, in fact the only, modes of action in such a world. We have to read the world about us to understand, and any gestures we make or actions we take constitute a form of writing, a symbolic communication. Any dualisms between mind and body are therefore radically subverted, so much so that Cixous can describe reading as eating. Similarly, writing 'follows life like its shadow, extends it, hears it, engraves it' (FSU, p 20). Moreover, writing and reading are aspects of one and the same process. 'Writing and reading are not separate; reading is a part of writing. A real reader is a writer. A real reader is already on the way to writing' (TSL, p 21).

Postmodern thinking, then, sees our whole existence as conditioned by intratextuality. Two consequences follow for our understanding of the spiritual. First, if we reject the dualities of the literal and the metaphorical, the physical and the nonphysical, so too we must reject the notions of minds as separate from bodies, of spirituality as separate from materiality. Because thinking is a form of writing, it cannot be divorced from corporeality. Thought is carnal; writing is incarnation (particularly, for Cixous, writing which allows 'the feminine' to emerge<sup>3</sup>). Secondly, the end of my body is not the boundary of my self; I am mapped onto other bodies. My body, then, is porous, frangible, always necessarily open to other bodies and connected to other bodies. I do not exist as an autonomous agent, owing clear precise ideas of the reality of things and putting them into action. Rather, I am as much authored by others as authoring. As Cixous writes, playing on the link between 'author' and 'authorize': 'We are much more than our own name authorizes us and obliges us to believe we are' (CW, p 179).

Neither the writer nor the reader is a unified subject; our writing, and indeed our whole existence, abounds in voices, rhythms and vocabularies which are ours only because they also belong to others, others to whom we have given ourselves over and who have given themselves over to us.

### *The other*

The objection is frequently raised that postmodern philosophies of intratextuality endorse linguistic idealism. Because these philosophies emphasize how language constructs our worlds and how we are each a prisoner of our language, the impression can arise that, behind the endless cavalcade of rhetoric about signs, a profound and sinister nihilism lurks. Frequently, Derrida's most (in)famous statement, 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte – there is nothing outside the text',<sup>4</sup> is taken as evidence for this mode of philosophical scepticism.

However, whereas some postmodern thinkers might well be criticized for holding this apocalyptic position (Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard come to mind), the charge certainly cannot be levelled against Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Lévinas or any of the French philosophical feminists. Each of these thinkers emphasizes that there is a prelinguistic experience, that there is something outside language, that there is a transcendent horizon. There is an other, whose otherness is radically different from that implicit in the distinctions and differences among signs themselves. However, this other impinges upon the textual – in the broadest sense – only through the marks it makes within the textual itself. The other is recognized as such only through what it inscribes within the textual: silences, rich and excessive resonances, the sense of utter inadequacy or *aporia*. Through its recognizing the real existence of that which is other, postmodern philosophy can also acknowledge the possibility of the ethical, the divine and the spiritual. Derrida, in a recent exploration of the links between negative theology, deconstruction and the work of Angelus Silesius, writes:

Now this revolution, at once interior and exterior, which makes philosophy, onto-theological metaphysics, pass over the other edge of itself, is also the condition for its translatability. What makes philosophy go outside itself calls for a community that overflows its language and broaches [*entame*] a process of universalization.<sup>5</sup>

For Julia Kristeva in her *Tales of love* and Luce Irigaray in her *An ethics of sexual difference*, the relationship to the other takes on a specific form in the difference – both physiological and socially constructed – between the sexes.

The other's presence demands what Cixous describes as 'a relentless process of de-selfing, de-egoisation' (CW, p 156). Through writing, the self is both defined and dissolved. The space or interval enabled by difference bespeaks a plenitude, not a nihilistic void. This plenitude demands that each of us is responsive (passive) and responsible (active); it announces not a spirituality of private mystical experience, but a spirituality of corporation (with all the various English and Latin associations of that word).

Cixous describes her own understanding of this economy of kenotic love as:

... comparable to the work of love that can take place between two human beings. To understand the other, it is necessary to go into their language, to make the journey through the other's imaginary. For you are strange to me. In the effort to understand, I bring you back to me, compare you to me. I translate you to me. And what I note is your difference, your strangeness. At that moment, perhaps, through recognition of my own differences, I might perceive something of you. (DJ, p 146)

In her use of 'imaginary' as a noun, Cixous is here drawing on Lacan. The imaginary, for Lacan, is the store place of images either conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined. An individual's use of language enables us to enter their imaginary. Notice, again, we remain in the realm of the textual – we move in, through and (perhaps) beyond writing and translating. But this engagement is an act of making love. Cixous is neither a linguistic idealist nor a sceptic; not for her a vision of language as merely an erotic power game with seductive signs. For Cixous there is a beyond, but a beyond that exists only through the encounter with the language of the stranger. There is a paradise of communion through community. Such ideas have echoes of utopianism and romanticism; they also indicate a convergence between French postmodern feminism and the spiritual traditions of the western world.

The quotation from Cixous evokes the question of how we know the other without domesticating or reducing it to an analogy of ourselves. This question has been high on the philosophical agenda since Edmund Husserl re-examined the Cartesian *cogito* – 'I think, therefore I am' – in his 1929 lectures, *Cartesian meditations*.<sup>6</sup> For Husserl, the other can only be the other-of-the-same, created in and through a projection of myself. The question of how we can know the other as other dominates postmodern thinking. For Cixous, it is in writing and reading that we encounter the other in his or her strangeness. It is not an immediate

encounter, but a long mediated process of what she calls expropriation. Whereas modern French and English use this term to denote an act of seizure, Cixous is drawing on its Latin roots and using it to indicate the renunciation (*ex*) of any claim upon that which belongs solely to the other (*proprius*). Expropriation is a process of ascesis. I must renounce any claim to knowledge of the other which implies that I control the other. In this sense, language is continually attempting to empty itself of content, and struggling to express how it is always incommensurate with what comes from outside. This struggle is a paradoxical and almost impossible attempt to gain 'extreme proximity while guarding against the trap of projection, of identification' (CW, p 171). But the struggle is also a journey into love, a journey made possible by love: love, as Cixous repeats tirelessly, which is not having.<sup>7</sup> This economy of love she associates with the feminine, in particular with *écriture féminine*.

### *Écriture féminine*

*Écriture féminine* is a mode of writing which disrupts the propositional kind of knowledge associated with the masculine. However, men too – for example Kleist, Kafka, Genet and Joyce – can write *écriture féminine*.<sup>8</sup> 'Feminine' and 'masculine' denote two forms of living, two economies of loving, two kinds of pleasure. The feminine lives through spending, renouncing its claims upon, emptying itself. To love 'is not to have in order to have. That is where the secret of a "feminine" pleasure is inscribed' (RCL, p 126). The feminine welcomes the other; it gives. As a form of writing it allows the voices of the other, the strangeness of the other, to appear and to question the writer. Within the feminine economy there is a trinodal structure: the self, the other, and the space between generated by their mutual desires for each other. The feminine economy works for the other to appear as other. It establishes and nurtures difference.

By contrast the masculine economy is based upon lack, upon the demand for satisfaction, upon appropriation. Cixous, drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis,<sup>9</sup> describes the masculine economy as 'inhibition and effusion, or discharge. The form that is being articulated is the masculine pleasure. It is determined by a resistance to castration. It leads to a "negative pleasure"' (RCL, p 133). The masculine is linked to capitalism, to exchange, to consumption, to profit in the marketplace. It constructs systems and identities. It names in order to control.<sup>10</sup>

*Écriture féminine* writes the narrative of the other, the narrative repressed in the masculine economy. It articulates how the gift of the

other is presented and received. In the body of the text we find inscribed the voice(s) of the other(s). *Écriture féminine* requires the abandonment of oneself as subject, the stripping of all one knows or understands, a disciplined waiting for the arrival of the other, the letting be of the other in all its strangeness.

One of the first lessons of living is the one that consists of *knowing how not to know*, which does not mean not knowing, but knowing how not to know, knowing how to avoid getting closed in by knowledge, knowing more and less than what one knows, knowing how to understand, while never being on the side of ignorance . . . [W]e have to strike out for the un-known. (CW, p 161)

*Écriture féminine* inscribes the process of impoverishment, of descent into not-knowing and not-having. As writing 'it comes from deep inside . . . It is deep in my body, further down, behind thought' (TSL, p 118).

#### *The spiritual in postmodern thought*

The parallels between Cixous and classical mystical writings – of Teresa of Avila, say, or Meister Eckhart – I will allow others, more expert than I, to draw out. In both cases the hallmarks of spiritual writing are absence and intense proximity, rich sensuality and the fierce discipline of a self-emptying love, plenitude and intellectual darkness. Cixous' work also finds parallels in other postmodern thinkers. From the beginning, Derrida has recognized and explored the relationship between his project of deconstruction and the discourse of negative theology.<sup>11</sup> Irigaray has called for a re-evaluation of religion's role in women's lives.<sup>12</sup> Kristeva has been castigated by some of her critics for her 'nostalgic relationship to Christianity' which reveals itself in the way she 'privileges and recreates the Christian imaginary' when describing psychic and psychoanalytic processes.<sup>13</sup> The Jesuit philosopher of history, Michel de Certeau, who throughout his work examined spiritual writings, described mystic discourses in ways that draw close to Cixous' accounts of textuality. De Certeau speaks of the mystic as a 'self-surpassing spirit, seduced by an impregnable origin or end called God', of 'the movement of perpetual departure' which 'goes on walking, then tracing itself out in silence, in writing'.<sup>14</sup>

How does postmodern thinking conceive the spiritual, and understand the experience of the spiritual? The postmodern vision of the spiritual is related to the romantic preoccupation with the sublime – that destabilizing experience in, through and beyond the network of

signs that is what we perceive. The experience of the sublime, from Kant's *Critique of judgement* (1790) to Jean-François Lyotard's *Lessons on the analytic of the sublime* (1991), is an experience of something outside, of something beyond our projections and constructions that nevertheless leaves its trace on them, a subversive, rupturing event that is at once painful and pleasurable. This is how Cixous describes the longing, the vision, the journey:

I see it shining, the splendour of my existence, my external treasure, I see above my head the meaning of my whole story. A single night separates me from it. I try to cross it. I hold out my hands, I am sobbing with rage, I have it at the tips of my fingers . . . At the heart of it lies a soft gleaming pearl like the flash of eternity at the heart of the moment. My star that still has no name! My secret is no bigger than a hazelnut of eternity. (CW, p 90–91)

Would it be premature to say that this experience is an experience of God? Derrida and Ricoeur certainly think so, and Kristeva persists in reading the experience psychoanalytically as the longing for integration and the healing of the split self.<sup>15</sup> But Cixous speaks of God:

When I have finished writing, when I am a hundred and ten, all I will have ever done will have been to attempt a portrait of God. Of the God. Of what escapes us and makes us wonder . . . I mean our own divinity, awkward, twisted, throbbing, our own mystery. (CW, p 129)

The factor common to both postmodern spirituality and traditional Christian spirituality is the key notion of translation or transfiguration or transubstantiation – a notion which both spiritualities announce, advocate and perform. The act of writing involves the mutual transfiguration both of the self who writes and the other who is written about. Intratextuality, reading and writing, places us in transit, in a process of continual transformation. Seen in terms of Christian spirituality, this process is one of worship, of continual self-transcendence.

Some may write in such contexts of the self's annihilation, or of its absorption into some impersonal flux. But Cixous, like Kristeva and Irigaray, retains a notion of the self as an important nodal point, nourished through impoverishment, self-denial and self-emptying. For Cixous authors remain, though they are always already authored; writers must write, though they are always already readers of other writers. The self lives through wonder and adoration:

In the beginning, I adored. What I adored was human. Not persons; not totalities, not defined and named beings. But signs. Flashes of being

that glanced off me, kindling me. Lightning-like bursts that came to me: Look! I blazed up. And the sign withdrew. Vanished. While I burned on and consumed myself wholly. What had reached me, so powerfully cast from a human body, was Beauty: there was a face, with all the mysteries inscribed and preserved on it; I was before it, I sensed that there was a beyond, to which I did not have access, an unlimited place. (CW, p 1)

This adoration occurs in, through and as discourse, signs, writing. The 'I' is continually displaced, transfigured and transfiguring. This spirituality is not a private experience nor a pre-linguistic reality within the soul, but a social and material experience, embedded within communication. It is conscious always of its own construction and its provisional nature. Concerning the 'body of the soul' Cixous writes that it 'is made from a fine, fine ultrasensual substance, so finely sensitive it can pick up the murmur of every hatching' (CW, p 70). The soul is like tissue, like the web of signs itself, blown through by what is other.

To conclude, I underline two implications of postmodernism for spirituality. The first is critical, and is best summed up in the words of the feminist philosopher of religion, Grace Jantzen. In her recent work *Power, gender and Christian mysticism*, Jantzen demonstrates how English-speaking philosophy of religion has tended to understand spiritual or mystical experience as something private and disembodied, in ways that serve political, mainly masculine, interests. Postmodernism would emphasize 'that the idea of "mysticism" is a social construction, and that it has been constructed in different ways at different times'.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, and much more positively, spirituality is text, performed through writing and reading. Spirituality is not simply *in* but *of* the text. It is not that our texts communicate a spiritual reality distinct from them: rather, spirituality occurs in and through narrative and participation. The recounting of a story, the telling of what is happening *now*, the immediacy of writing itself, creation itself – these pull from the plenitude of the real a name, a thread, a note. Spirituality is material and embodied.

But since when were authentic mystics afraid of the corporeal? As Edith Wyschogrod points out:

It does not help to say Saint Catherine *saw* the passion, although visions of the passion are common. Instead, truer to her own account, she entered into the passion, felt it with her whole being. Nothing



intervened between herself and it. The lack of distance that informs her encounter is experienced as pain. If sense is to be made of Saint Catherine's perceptual acts, her brand of seeing must be redescribed as the body's seeing.<sup>17</sup>

The same might be said of the meditations of Julian of Norwich, which centre on the physical body of Christ and the textual body of the Scriptures. For such mystics the whole body is assimilated to what physiology calls the sensorium: the centre in the brain to which the nerves transmit sense-impressions. Similarly, postmodern thought sees the body, inextricably bound as it is to language, as a sensorium. To enter the kenosis of language is to enter the passion, to experience the passion. For Derrida writing is a wounding: negative theology bears the stigmata of its intrinsic inadequacy.<sup>18</sup> For Cixous writing is a kenotic experience, a bodily experience, a textual mysticism.

Such understandings appear revolutionary only if we are in thrall to a vision of 'spirituality' as private, interior and immaterial – a construction which probably began to emerge only with eighteenth-century Pietism, however influential it may have become through romanticism and the work of William James. But an older Christian use of 'spiritual' referred precisely to readings and appropriations of the Scriptures, readings not constrained by the mere letter but empowered by the spirit. Spirituality was textual.<sup>19</sup>

Intratextuality, with the world as an allegory in which all are writers and readers, returns us to a sacramentalism of the literal or letteral, a spirituality of the body. But the vehicle for our transfiguration is not Scripture alone. Or rather it is Scripture alone, but Scripture understood in its widest and etymological sense – *scriptura*, *écriture*, writing.

#### NOTES

Abbreviations in the text refer to works by Hélène Cixous:

FSU: 'From the scene of the unconscious to the scene of history', trans Deborah Carpenter in Ralph Cohen (ed), *The future of literary theory* (London: Routledge, 1989).

RCL: *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, trans Verene Andermatt Conley (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

DJ: 'Difficult joys' in Helen Wilcox, Keith McWatters, Ann Thompson, Linda R. Williams (eds), *The body of the text: Hélène Cixous, reading and teaching* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

CW: *'Coming to writing' and other essays*, ed Deborah Jenson, trans Sarah Cornell et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

TSL: *Three steps on the ladder of writing*, trans Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>1</sup> The best introductions to the work of Hélène Cixous so far are: Verene Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992); and Susan Sellers, *Hélène*

*Cixous: authorship, autobiography and love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995). The latter is a good introduction to Cixous' fiction.

<sup>2</sup> One should also be aware of the closely related concept of 'intertextuality', which describes the way in which one text builds upon and works through another. For example, the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray discusses Jacques Lacan's psycholinguistics, which is based on Freud, who drew on Nietzsche, who was reacting to Spinoza, and so on back, at least in principle, to the Presocratics. Such deliberate evocation of earlier figures raises our awareness of the inescapable burden of the past. Intertextuality is a method, a self-conscious practice, which leads us to re-evaluate the character of pastiche and parody, the status of the original *vis-à-vis* the copy. In any particular text, it may be difficult to maintain the distinction between intertextuality and intratextuality.

<sup>3</sup> For Cixous' understanding of *écriture féminine*, see below. Julia Kristeva's work also concerns itself with the feminine or, for her, the maternal, in language. This she associates with the semiotic – the rhythmic, destabilizing elements in language which cause excesses of signification in the symbolic. She too has developed the idea of language as deeply related to love and desire. For an introduction to her work see *In the beginning was love*, trans Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology*, trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p 158.

<sup>5</sup> 'Sauf le nom', trans John P. Leavey Jr in Thomas Dutoit (ed), *On the name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p 70 (translation amended).

<sup>6</sup> *Cartesian meditations*, trans Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), especially the fifth meditation.

<sup>7</sup> See Cixous' essay, "'The egg and the chicken": love is not having', *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, pp 98–122.

<sup>8</sup> It is outside the scope of this essay to discuss gender and sexuality in Cixous' work. Suffice it to say that, for Cixous, the referents of 'male' and 'female' are unstable. People move frequently from one to the other. See her 'Tancredi continues' in *Coming to writing' and other essays*, pp 78–103.

<sup>9</sup> In psychoanalysis, it is the threat of castration by the father-figure that coerces the male subject to abandon his identification with his mother and instead to model himself on his father. For Lacan, this point in the Oedipal complex is where the child also enters the realm of the symbolic, of language. For Cixous, then, masculine desire is always operating through inhibitions and through fears of castration.

<sup>10</sup> There is an interesting account of the feminine and masculine economies in Judith Still's essay 'The feminine economy: some preliminary thoughts' in *The body of the text*, pp 49–60.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida refers to the kinship between negative theology and deconstruction in his 1968 programmatic essay 'Difference', which can be found in *Margins of philosophy*, trans Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), pp 251–277. Some important landmarks in the continuing discussion are: *Positions* (1972), 'Of an apocalyptic tone adopted in recent philosophy' (1983), 'How to avoid speaking: denials' (1987) and 'Sauf le nom' (1991). See also Howard Coward and Toby Foshay (eds), *Derrida and negative theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> See particularly the essays collected in *Sexes and genealogies*, trans Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) and *An ethics of sexual difference*, trans Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: Athlone Press, 1993). Several scholars have explored the character of the divine in Irigaray's work. Some of the most recent contributions are: Philippa Berry, 'The burning glass: paradoxes of feminist revelation in *Speculum*' in Carolyn Burke et al (eds), *Engaging with Irigaray* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp 229–246; Kathryn Bond Stockton, *God between their lips: desire between women in Irigaray, Bronte and Eliot* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Graham Ward, 'Sexuality and divinity: Irigaray on Christ', *Modern Theology* (April 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: unveiling the double-bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p 128.

<sup>14</sup> *The mystic fable*, trans Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 299.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as another*, trans Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 355; Julia Kristeva, *In the beginning was love*.

<sup>16</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, gender and Christian mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Saints and postmodernism: revisioning moral philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp 17–18.

<sup>18</sup> *On the name*, p 61.

<sup>19</sup> See Beryl Smalley's classic, *The study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952). She writes of the twelfth-century Victorines: 'Belonging to their century, they had a strong sacramental sense, which gave them a new devotion to the "letter" of the Scripture. They still thought in metaphors which subordinated the literal sense to the spiritual' (p 196).