

Article

Susceptibility and Cixous's Self-Strange Subject

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Abstract: This essay reads a short narrative, “Savoir” by Hélène Cixous, to describe susceptibility as a problem organized around two lines of impingement: between subject and world and between consciousness and the wayward impulses of interior life. The young girl in Cixous’s text suffers a moment of disorientation and distress one misty morning and, against presumptions of inviolability and ideals of subjective consistency, this unhappy event comes to resonate with her disappointed trust in the generosity of the world, her anxious sense of betrayal with respect to those who ought to protect her and her insecurity about her own role in this complex of associations. The frame of susceptibility thus opens up a space for Cixous’s reader and this essay to think the subject in her inconsistency and self-strangeness.

Keywords: susceptibility; Cixous; subjectivity; inconsistency; uncanny

1. Introduction

For this Special Issue of *Philosophies* exploring the theme of susceptibility, the present essay offers a phenomenological reading of several girlhood anecdotes and images relayed by Hélène Cixous (b. 1937) [1,2], a Jewish writer and feminist who lived her girlhood largely in the city of Oran on the northwest coast of French Algeria in the 1940s—so before, during, and a few years after the era of its Vichy government in World War II, but a few years before the Algerian War (1954–1962) that would culminate in Algerian independence. Everyday conceptions of susceptibility often proceed from a given threat in the world that would impose, either actually or potentially, real harm upon the subject. In the context of official French anti-Semitism under Vichy rule, and in the context of pre-revolutionary violence such as the Sétif and Guelma massacres and reprisals of 1945, it is not hard to imagine that Algerian Jews at this time felt themselves all too susceptible to outbreaks of political violence. In the cities of the north coast especially, Algerian Jews were too assimilated with French culture to be broadly acceptable to Algerian Muslim militants and too religiously and geographically alien to French sentiment to be quite secure in the protections of either metropolitan France or the French Algerian settler militias. The 1934 Constantine riots, 800 km to the east of Oran, but still in the north of French Algeria, were then another part of the backdrop of recent history: an exchange of religious insults between a Jewish man and Muslim Algerians escalated into three days of riots and looting aimed toward Jewish families and businesses. The headline in the *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, 8 August 1934, gives a sense of what Jewish communities back in Oran might have heard in the aftermath of those events: “Algeria Riots Checked: Military in Control of Constantine; Witness Gives Slaughter Details: Girls Mutilated, Many Burned, Report Shows: List of Dead and Injured Runs Into Hundreds” [3]. They may also have heard something of another report: “During much of the rioting, the French police and security forces stood by and did little or nothing to stop the rioters” [4] (p. 139).

It is hard to guess very precisely how susceptibility to a generalized and sporadically murderous violence might have marked the experience of a girl then not more than 10 years old. Our inquiry here will not conclusively settle this question in the instance of young Hélène Cixous, whose anecdote, recounted years later, contains only the most oblique reference to the specific historical and ethnoreligious scene of her girlhood milieu. Nonetheless,



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as we will see, her writing very richly suggests its subject's acute sense of susceptibility to impositions variously sociocultural, personal, and existential. We will meditate on the traces of the historical moment visible in the anecdote, but we will also see a crucial—and I would say underappreciated—aspect of susceptibility located in its peculiar mode of realization. Susceptibility not only appears among the background facts of worldly mishaps that impose themselves upon the subject, but, as Cixous's subject will testify, it can appear fully realized even as mere potential—whether in the future, as something that might yet happen, or in the past, as something that might have happened and yet did not. This is so because the experience of susceptibility is not exhausted by external intrusions—it also encompasses “internal” impingements such as insecurity, anxiety, and wayward impulse that impose themselves upon ego and consciousness.

The frame of susceptibility thus grasps human frailty as a problem at once worldly, yes, but also existential and subjective. Maladies of constitution, miseries of circumstance, and impingements of a world sometimes cruel, criminal, or indifferent—these unhappy potentialities are always already written into the script of a human life. The critical question confronting the subject is thus twofold: how to come to terms with one's susceptibility to impingement, whether actualized or not, and how best to recalibrate our sometimes fantastically misconceived expectations about the extent of our autonomy and about the nature of the world and our entitlements within it.

Cixous's “Savoir”, published in *Veils* (1998), presents a third-person reminiscence, plausibly—even persuasively—autofictional, of her subject's natural myopia, its successful treatment in late middle age by corrective surgery, her subsequent marvel at being “born again” into an unmediated vision of the world, and her puzzled sense of loss and nostalgia for her former myopia, notwithstanding her miraculous new access to vision. The piece displays an inconsistent or split psychological state, but it also, as this essay will show, constitutes a profound rumination on the way the subject's identity informs (and is informed by) an error-prone interface between a finite and fragile girl and a world that presents itself alternately in welcoming eros and in susceptibility to suffering. The inconsistencies at the heart of identity are shown to be essential (not merely contingent) and this inconsistent truth of identity, this uneasy coexistence of contraries within the subject, has its own uncanny fascination that calls for critical attention.

Taken together, then, this essay turns to Cixous's text to reflect on how the subject contends with the *world*, as a sensate embodied subject in and against the world, and at the same time reflects on how the subject contends with *herself*, in a relation that is at once with and against herself. The concluding paragraphs of the present essay work through Cixous's commitment to sustaining, within thought, the fractures of self and world that “Savoir” introduces¹. For it is against the impulse to resolve opposed binaries through an act of judgment and against the tendency to overwrite wayward elements in deference to the ideal of formal consistency that Cixous's work defends the value of a truth suspended between the unsettling and the inconsistent.

2. A Young Girl's Thrownness and Her Upbraidings against the Permitting Stars

No one, surely, will be surprised to find that one of the key aspects of her myopia was how it made Cixous's young girl feel vulnerable and small, exposed and debilitated in the face of chance and change. The text gives the following anecdote to stand for her experience of myopia:

She had eyes and she was blind.

Every day she had to pass by the château. Help came from the statue of Joan of Arc. The great woman in gold brandished her flaming lance and showed her the way to the château. By following the golden sign she would finally get there. Until the day when. One morning in the square there was nothing. The statue was not there. No trace of the château. In place of the sacred horse a penumbral world. All was lost. Every step increased the confusion. She stopped, petrified, deprived of any help from her statue. She found herself stalled at the heart of the

invisible. Everywhere she saw this pale nothing without limit, it was as though by some false step she had entered, living, into death. The here-nothingness stayed, and no one. She seized up, fallen upright into the fathomless expanse of a veil [*un voile*], and *voilà* all that remained of city and time. The catastrophe had happened in silence.

And now who was she? Alone. A little nail stuck in the interval.

Later in the interval someone abruptly come from the nothing declared to her that things hadn't fled at all. They were definitely in their place. So was it she who could not see the statue or the château or the edges of the world or the bus? A little veil of mist had got the better of existences in her poor credulous eyes. The great statue of gold had not resisted. This was her first apocalypse [Gk: apo + kaluptein: un + to cover: uncovering, unveiling, revelation]. The city lost some of its solidity. [1] (pp. 3, 6) [2] (pp. 11, 14)

To take the passage at its plainest, the girl relies upon the statue of Joan of Arc to signpost her way to the château, until the misty day when she somehow misses the statue and feels herself lost and disoriented. Even persons less delicately tuned than Cixous's young girl might find it disconcerting to feel themselves seemingly astray along an accustomed path.

What I would like to highlight, here, is what we might call the *jouissance* of the account. It is not just that the girl has a practical problem, though, to be sure, she feels herself lost and needs to find her bearings. The writing evinces a passion in excess of its "practical" reading; its very hyperbole suggests that, for the girl, this misty day has exposed the world's potential for treachery. These wild currents of affect imply something like a personal affront in (1) the offensive general indifference of the cosmos to the suffering it imposes; (2) the petrifying uncertainty of the circumstances into which she's been thrown, with only the slender assistance of girlhood resourcefulness; and (3) the specific betrayal and abandonment by one seemingly appointed to help her navigate this world, who in this case, is Joan of Arc.

The revelation of the world's cruel indifference is a powerful part of her complaint. Every day she "had to pass by the château", every day she is forced to pass this gauntlet, every day she is exposed to the mishaps of worldly circumstance. This route she passes successfully, if insecurely, "until the day when"—a sentence lacking both subject and verb but stretching forth its expectation on the lift of the "until" phrase, only to abort it with a full stop. Until the day when. Period. Until the day when, for whatever reason, perhaps a morning mist, she feels she has lost her way like the famous hedgehog in the fog, in a world now penumbral, in which "all was lost", stranding the girl in a limitless pale nothingness, amid intimations of a living death.

From the offense implied in her hyperbole, we might infer that Cixous's girl cherishes an expectation that the world ought justly to be otherwise: the world ought to offer her security and more. It ought to welcome her into a world of eros and wonder; it ought to be a world that gives itself unreservedly to necessities, satisfactions, and pleasures. It should not be a world defined, as it seemingly is, by impingement and refusal.

If this has been the way of the world—uncertain, indefinite, treacherous, ungiving and indifferent to human suffering—the girl has not hitherto been without aid. The golden statue of Joan of Arc has stood in the square to point her in the right direction. A flaming lance, a sacred horse, an otherworldly golden sign: the statue intervenes in an indefinite world, but only "until the day when" the girl is "deprived" [*privée*] of any aid from her statue. Here, the sense of *privée* is not of a regrettable objective deficiency but of an emotional loss in the face of privation: a bereavement, as the etymology would have it, or an abandonment.

As a symbol, the statue of Joan of Arc gathers together the existential and subjective sense of crisis in "Savoir" and the sociocultural givens of Cixous's own childhood in the 1940s². There was, indeed, such a statue on the cathedral square in Oran³, inaugurated in 1931 and in easy walking distance both to the Jewish quarter and to the former palace and

Château Neuf of the Bey of Oran. But this figure of supernatural aid refracts a much larger iconography of political, ethnic, religious, and gender struggle.

During Cixous's young girlhood years, the same Vichy authorities who revoked citizenship rights from the Algerian Jewish community⁴ and imposed antisemitic humiliations on Cixous's father⁵, also promoted the figure of Joan of Arc in its propaganda, since her legend was broadly acceptable among mainstream and conservative elements of French society and could function as a national symbol of strength and purity [11] (pp. 711–712). But it is also true that the extreme right of French politics had seized upon her as an icon for its own purposes, in pointed preference to the Marianne figure, whose symbolism resonated in a more revolutionary register; hence, Joan of Arc could be presented and popularly understood as a symbol of the French nation, but she was also an icon for the anti-Dreyfusard passions of the 1890s and 1900s, the Catholic integralists, and the royalists in the Action Française [12] (p. 216)⁶. Édouard Drumont, for example, a newspaper editor, the founder of the Antisemitic League of France, and the legislator for Algiers in the Chamber of Deputies, memorably militated for a specifically Aryan figuration of Joan of Arc [13] (par. 3). If, after her 1920 canonization, much of France regarded Joan as a saint and accepted her as a national heroine, they were blithely untroubled by the special enthusiasm this figure attracted from more politically radical and antisemitic elements on the extreme right.

It is in this context and in the context of an intensifying colonial struggle, that we see the appearance of Joan of Arc resonating beyond the specific perfidy of Cixous's misty-day privation. In the regard of a myopic young Jewish girl of Oran, Joan of Arc—France—ought to have protected all of her people, but history had shown her to be a worrisomely unreliable protectress for the Jewish community—and a horrifying colonial oppressor to much of the indigenous Muslim population. For French Algerian Jews, and for a young Jewish girl in Oran, it is easy to imagine that the figure of Joan of Arc would come to signify ambivalently, as indicating divine favor and supernatural aid for the French in their hour of need, but also as a real risk of betrayal or abandonment when extremist rightwing elements (abetted by a supine French polity) might redefine “French” to exclude French Algerian Jews⁷.

This essay suggested earlier that if we restrict our conception of susceptibility to the line of impingement between world and subject, between the outside and the in, we might miss the enormous extent to which the scene of susceptibility is also located along a rather different line of impingement, between consciousness and the intrusion of moods, anxieties, fantasies, ideations, and stress. We can see this with the statue of Joan of Arc that signposts a young girl's walk to the château until the day when it is somehow missed in the mist, whereupon its symbolic dimension comes to dominate the multifaceted event of susceptibility: the frailty of the girl, the potential cruelty of the world, the potential perfidy of a protectress, the exposure of the subject to the larger forces of history. Cixous's text urges us to think this subjective dimension without trivializing it. Fright, anxiety, worry; a more distressed sense of the world and its potential impingements; a young girl's sense of exposure to harm: these invisible things are also real in their way.

Now consider that Cixous's subject has another resource to mitigate her myopia, mentioned in an aside, some pages into the reminiscence: prior to her surgery, she wears lenses to correct for her myopia [1] (p. 9). This is an important point, since it suggests that, even in the absence of saintly intervention, she is not without support in resolving the practical problem; the deeper problem, so far as the text is concerned, perhaps more truly lies in the sphere of the potential and the sphere of the moral. It is an affront to the subject that, in her pre-surgery days, she must encounter the world from behind glass: an affront that this is a necessity, an affront that her sensuous encounter with the world is just a little more mediated and exposed to the hazards of chance—as glasses may fog up in a mist that would less trouble the naked eye.

Cixous's text displays some ambivalence, as this paper will develop later, but her subject also voices her clear sense that her myopia is, as she puts it, “an unmerited impotence”, an “injustice” that “had chosen her and placed her apart” [1] (p. 11); it is a curse and a

“fatality” she has been born with and about which she can be docile [1] (p. 8) or be angry [1] (p. 11), yet until her surgery, it seems only ever impotently so. In short, her myopia (and the uncertainty and insecurity it sustains) brings into focus a complaint about the fact that each human being is thrown severally into a world of circumstance, independent of her will or wish and, as the text suggests, without discernible merit or justice in the award.

3. Susceptibility and the Problem of Subjective Inconsistency

Conceptual categories of subject and world, inside and out, which orient dearly held notions of propriety—and inform any philosophical account, including our own—can be illuminating in their way, but the artificiality of this conceptual separation is already evident. In the first section of this essay, the anecdote of a young girl’s missed encounter with the statue of Joan of Arc, gave us an occasion to reflect on the line of impingement between the subject and the impositions of worldly circumstance, but it also revealed itself, no less, as an “interior” event of distress and worry about impositions yet unactualized.

The second section of this essay will shift our ground more squarely to a different line of impingement—between, on the one hand, consciousness and ego and, on the other hand, the wayward impulses of interior life. On this new ground, it will explore the deep disconcertment that Cixous’s girl faces from her own susceptibility to error. This is not to leave the world behind, as we will see, but the literary image at the heart of this section will situate the world as a second-order problem: the subject’s main worry is that she will betray herself and that this betrayal will subsequently have pernicious downstream effects on her relation to the world and to a protectress more fundamentally freighted than the figure of Jeanne la Pucelle.

In Cixous’s image, this second line of impingement appears first as a problem of self-trust. The girl’s myopia, while practically correctable with artificial lenses, by its very existence opens her up to doubt and thus introduces an ineliminable degree of uncertainty into her relations with the world. It installs a permanent anxiety around her vulnerability to uncertainties of perception and her susceptibility to errors of judgment. But at stake is more than just epistemological uncertainty. Her sense of doubt and precarity about “everything” finds its keenest anguish, and its liveliest sense of treachery, in the girl’s insecurity with respect to the figure of her mother:

myopia has its shaky seat in judgment. It opens the reign of an eternal uncertainty that no prosthesis can dissipate.

From then on she did not know. She and Doubt were always inseparable: had things gone away or else was it she who mis-saw them? She never saw safely. Seeing was a precarious, unsteady believing. Everything was perhaps. Living was in a state of alert. Running headlong to her mother she remained in the possibility of error until the last second. And what if her mother were suddenly not her mother when she got to her face? The pain of not having known that the unknown woman could not be my mother, the shame of taking an unknown for the known par excellence, did blood not cry out, not feel? Treachery of blood of sense so you can get the wrong mother, be wrong up to and including your mother? . . .

Truths are unmasked a second before the end. Do I see what I see? What was not there was perhaps there. To be and not to be were never exclusive. [1] (pp. 6, 7) [2] (p. 14)

We have, then, a mourning for a lost state of security and puerile sense of certitude, but note how internalized the problem has become: at its most immediate, it is not that the world *is* threatening. It is that the girl worries that it *might* be threatening and, whether it is or it isn’t, she cannot be certain because her senses have a demonstrated capacity to deceive and betray her. It would be unsurprising if a myopic young girl were to imagine that, ordinarily, eyes operate as organs of self-evident certainty for those who have them. The girl, however, is in the unhappy position of finding that, though she “had eyes”, she was “blind” and so her knowing (*savoir*) has become unsettled in relation to her seeing

(*sa voir*). A worry about the world becomes a sense of the possible treachery of her eyes and the potential for infidelity this introduces into the most intimate relations she sustains to the world and the people in it, very much including her own mother. There is a mutually resonant set of potential betrayals implied here: the betrayal of the subject by the cosmic order that brought her into the world with impaired vision, the unwitting self-treachery of a daughter violating the recognition she owes to her mother, and—possibly, though this remains unarticulated and unrealized—the unknown of the mother’s response to a daughter’s treachery: what if, for their part, mothers too were susceptible to errors, misperceptions, and treacheries? This complex of relations, with the vulnerability and upset it implies, discomposes the text, as we see in the slippages of the narrative voice that, over three sentences, slips from *her* mother to *my* mother to *your* mother.

Again, though, let us consider our terms quite carefully. In the image of the girl and her mother (or in the image of the girl and the woman who is not her mother), the worry is that the girl will manifest some lack of affinity for the mother—that the girl, because of the flaw in her vision, perhaps a “treachery of blood”, will be the betrayer of the mother and that the mother, in the girl’s anxious imagination, will then regard the girl as an unnatural daughter, deficient in some essential degree of affinity. We might say that, insofar as we are susceptible to worry, we are all *Möglichkeitsmenschen*, all “possibilitarians”, to borrow Robert Musil’s word [15] (pp. 11, 12), alive to even the unrealized possibilities of things and events. Observe the extreme tenuousness of whatever qualifies this phantom event as a “treachery”: an event is posed but as an unrealized possibility, as if the nature of the world, or the nature of the girl’s experience of the world, were to include not only what happens in objective or subjective reality, but also its unrealized possibilities—including, here, the subjectively posed possibility of a maternal response that seems never to have come to pass. The girl discerns the possibility of “treachery” in herself and frets over the mother’s possible response, if such a thing were to happen. Whatever this maternal response would be (if it had been), it would be secondary, however, proceeding from the “treachery” and the “fault” of the girl herself [1] (p. 3) [2] (p. 11); it would not, in the first instance, proceed from any caprice of the mother. So the anxiety of the example is really twofold: that the girl will incur some adverse response from the mother—and that she will have deserved it due to some flaw in her constitution. Deserve it? For an “unmerited impotence”? It seems an offensive notion, philosophically speaking, even accepting that self-reproach is not always a rational phenomenon. Let us say that she did nothing to merit her native myopia, but having been awarded it, even if unjustly, she worries that she thenceforth has a reduced claim on her mother’s constancy.

The question then arises in the relation of the girl and her world: who might forsake whom? Who might fail the other? Where does this “refusal” lie, as the text asks in its opening paragraph [1] (p. 3)—is the world refusing her or is she refusing the world? Is she refusing the mother or is the mother refusing her? We will return later to such questions and we will see that, even as they persist within a possibilitarian frame that complicates the unitary identity presumed in such questions, they open upon an important theme of Cixous’s writing—namely, a kind of inconsistency of consciousness such that one can “be of two minds” about things and such that, in this respect, one can be a stranger to oneself and that indeed one is no longer *one*, but plural in important ways.

We know these things and yet, in the event, they somehow catch us by surprise anyway: the world will impinge upon the subject’s happiness, satisfaction, comfort, or freedom, or, it may be that the subject will suffer a malfunction understood as internal to her constitution. But whatever the case, the result is much the same: the subject is exposed as in some measure inadequate to her circumstance; Cixous’s text nevertheless gives us an occasion to reflect on some of the ways that susceptibility resonates beyond the event’s practical import.

In particular, Cixous’s text suggests how, within a phenomenology of susceptibility, the impediments of the world can offend our fond presumption of a world more or less just and generous—a world that, we feel, at least *ought* to smile upon our deserving selves. Our

susceptibility to mishap thus exposes the startlingly imperfect correspondence between our perceptions of a world that sometimes feels like a great gift of beauty and pleasure, our underlying presumption that the beauty and pleasure of the world reflect a benign cosmic order as well as our own just deserts, and—in acutest discord with all this—the periodic vision of a cosmos characterized by an indifference so absolute as to be interpretable as cruelty. The girl manages this discord by allowing for a certain ambivalence in her self-assessment: an unexpected crisis one misty morning disturbs her sense for the predictability of experience; nonetheless, some degree of orderliness might be restored even so if she were to admit the possibility that, in some sense, she deserves this unhappy turn after all.

It is curious that Cixous's girl interprets the impingements of the world as if they represented something like an adverse judgment regarding her deserts and not, rather, random chance or processes indifferent to the moral and ethical field. The image of a young girl's abashment at misrecognizing her mother reminds us that moral structures are also adopted through the basic dynamics of childhood experience. Hence, an uncertainty deriving from native myopia is shown to metastasize into a sense of shame for a treacherous possible failure in the daughter's relation to her mother. As the girl comes to situate her crisis within a moral economy bound to her mother, and to a possibilitarian world of potential caprice and adverse judgment, the reader is led to reflect on the effects of the subject's long years of childhood immaturity and profound dependence on the whim of others⁸. We will see how this formative period of the subject inscribes her within a world of doubt, second-guessing, and susceptibility to the caprice of the other's response. The presumed caretaking agency may be posed as cosmic, saintly, national, or maternal, but, whatever the case, the field of satisfaction and security, pleasure and privation, is framed as dependent upon some kind of agency whose response or non-response to need is interpreted through the frame of the subject's success or failure in pleasing the Other.

We have already observed in "Savoir" that the relation to the Other, as in the relation of the subject to her world and the girl's concern about her mother's possible response, is organized around a question of *jouissance*. At a certain level of abstraction, we might say that, for subjects insofar as they suffer lack, the Other is postulated as having the power to grant or withhold satisfaction in place of that lack⁹. This question of *jouissance* is at stake partly in the sense that it is a question of whose *jouissance* we are talking about here: are we talking about the subject herself, who feels that it is her pleasure at stake in the response or nonresponse of the Other? Or are we talking about the Other, whom it may please to refuse satisfaction to the subject? Adding to our complications is the fact that the Other in question is not the other person or agency in actual reality, but rather the Other as the Other exists in the sometimes-wayward psychic life of the subject: something like an internal structure of the subject, albeit distinct from consciousness and ego. The consequence is that when the subject issues a demand or implies her expectation of a gift, she is asking both for satisfaction, but also, no less, for the Other to give a manifestation of favor, a sign of love¹⁰. We can see, then, that the relation to the Other is permeated with questions of *jouissance*, its actual or potential refusal, its granting or deprivation, its gracious or grudging demonstration, and its ambiguities of who enjoys and who is enjoyed.

Multiplying our complications is the fact that the girl feels she cannot trust herself, as if there were multiple agencies proper to the subject, but unreliable or inconsistent in their commitment to the ego's projects and best intentions. It is possible that, through a native deficiency of filial constancy, the girl will betray herself and betray her mother and thus face alone the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Phenomenologically speaking, her susceptibility partly consists of the revelation of her own dispersed subjectivity and, by extension, her "internal" susceptibility to wayward impulses, her capacity for self-betrayal (undermining the projects of her ego), and her fantasies of autonomy coming under stress¹¹.

4. Susceptibility in the Context of Subjective Strangeness

The first two sections of this essay gave us occasion to reflect on the lines of impingement between subject and world and between consciousness and the wayward impulses

of interior life. At the same time, we could also see that, conditioning the event of susceptibility, there were dearly held presumptions of fundamental proprieties (a respectful world, an inviolable self) and fundamental qualities (coherence, consistency) that were traduced and offended and, as such, accounted for some of the jouissance discernible in Cixous's anecdote and image. This concluding section of the essay will show how events of susceptibility can slide into an exposure of self-strangeness and how this leads Cixous's text to reflect upon the uncanny terms of one's being in the world. Hence, this section will follow her subject's strangely ambivalent response to her surgery and her self-astonished effort to find a poetic or analytical understanding of it—as she asks, essentially, *who am I such that I respond in this way?*

Toward the end of the narrative, after her initial jubilation with the success of her surgery, Cixous's subject puzzles on her now-lost myopia, curiously troubled by the sense of her own self-inconsistency, the incoherent multiplicity of her own composition:

But if myopia could be expelled, was it then a foreigner? She had always had the presentiment that her myopia was her own foreigner, her essential foreignness [*sa propre étrangère, son étrangeté essentielle*], her own accidental necessary weakness. Her fate. And she had left her fate behind with a leap? Left her skin. Her eyelid in which her soul was lying sewn. [1] (p. 10) [2] (pp. 16, 17)

This odd passage is worth dwelling on. Let us begin with what I think is the central phrase here: “essential foreignness”. Her myopia has been her “essential foreignness”—whatever that might mean, since there is a tension, if not necessarily a contradiction, between what is foreign and what is essential. Cixous's formulation here is *étrangeté essentielle*. This is a surprising formulation because the usual French word for foreignness or strangeness (also uncanniness¹²) would be *étrangeté*; Cixous, in contrast, uses *étrangeté*, thereby evoking the difference between a quality and an identity: between, on the one hand, one's quality (among other qualities) of strangeness or foreignness and, on the other hand, one's identity or composition describable in terms of “strangeness”.

In the rumination given above, the text declares she has “always” dwelt with the presentiment, the *pressenti*, that “sa myopie était sa propre étrangère”—her myopia was her own stranger, both in girlhood and in later life when meditating on her condition. But then, the text immediately revisits her point and rephrases it with a deliberate twist: “son étrangeté essentielle”, her myopia was her essential strangeness. In the first phrase, her myopia is articulated as *her* stranger, a stranger that, so to speak, may be subsumed by one who is not a stranger to herself, as if Cixous's subject were conceptually separable into several parts: her non-strange self and the myopia that has been her own stranger, belonging to the non-strange part of herself. Such a hierarchical conception of subjective split will recall the schemas of Anglo-American ego-psychology, but let us now contrast this to the conceptualization in the second phrase, when her myopia is articulated as her essential strangeness, again something proper to Cixous's subject, but this time articulated as something inseparable, an existential fact informing or deforming every aspect of her subjectivity. In the first phrase, Cixous's text suggests that, yes, there is a stranger lurking inside her, but others need not necessarily treat with that part of her, since she herself can sort of hold this stranger at a remove, as one aspect of herself among others. In the second phrase, there is no escape from the stranger that Cixous's subject essentially is and always is.

The second phrase, that her myopia was her essential strangeness, sounds more truly like presumably inescapable fate, as the text explicitly proposes. Indeed, there is the third phrase, amplifying yet again her longstanding presentiment that her myopia was not only her own stranger, even her own strangeness, but also now “sa propre faiblesse nécessaire accidentelle”, her own lamentable feebleness, which constitutes a fate at once unmotivated and inescapable. The sequence of the phrases arrives now finally, in the third phrase, at something stranger still than the stranger that one can conceive or that one can oneself be: the alien logic or inhuman justice, perhaps the illogic or injustice, cosmically speaking, that person A is thrown into existence with this set of

aptitudes, assets, debilities, and vulnerabilities, while person B is thrown into existence with a different, perhaps more favorable set of capacities and affordances; accidental from the perspective of human notions of justice and merit, but no less necessary for all that. In short, three conceptions of the stranger: the stranger that one *has* and feels within oneself, the stranger that one essentially *is* even to oneself, and the absolute stranger, fate, alien and other, that has dictated ahead of time, or outside of time, the restrictive terms of one's powers and freedoms in this life. When the text reflects that "myopia was her truth" [1] (p. 10) [2] (p. 17), *her* idiosyncratic truth, as I take it, this was perhaps what was meant: that myopia has conditioned her being in the world—a fact, real and genuine, bearing upon both the possibilities and limitations of her being. She would hate to have left behind this fate and this truth, even if there was something a little deathly, a little constricting there.

These little catastrophes, these little apocalypses—the wearing of glasses, the sense of separation and refusal from a world where one had looked for a warmer welcome, worries about becoming lost, intuitions of a fraught ethnopolitical scene, anxieties about an accidental misrecognition of the mother—these little disasters do not themselves compose the significance of the text's drama but rather serve to indicate the profounder, necessary accidents of fate and givenness. It makes little sense for readers to cast a trivializing regard upon uncertainties and anxieties that come to nothing, since these are really proxies for the experience of vulnerability. Moreover, whether they are proxies or not, the text's investment in these little apocalypses, and the art the narrative brings to bear on their revelation enlivens this text's strange pleasures for readers willing and able to let go of everyday skepticisms and, thus, to give themselves over to the text.

The acknowledgment that "susceptibility" highlights one's exposure to external mishap is implicit in the ordinary understanding of the word. To observe that some portion of this phenomenon comprises the incertitude of the event, its aspect of mere potentiality, whether to be fulfilled or not, is also baked into the basic concept, even if it tends to remain underthought insofar as it underscores our subjection both to change and to incalculable contingency, and thereby throws us into an indeterminate space and existential question. What remains more deeply underthought is how susceptibility can also be, as with Cixous's subject, a matter of "internalities": our multifarious and inconsistent composition¹³ can set us against ourselves and can imbue apparent "externalities" with the significant "internal" maladies of self-betrayal relative to the ego's projects.

Cixous's text, then, ruminates on her subject's corrective eye surgery and takes this as an occasion to reflect on susceptibility and the subject's relation to the world—whether the world is a place of welcome and wonder, or whether the world is a place of perfidious cruelty or utter indifference, whether the self in its vulnerability to mishap and error is supported or else betrayed by its powers of perception, whether the subject can or cannot rely on the pity and love of a protectress, whether the struggles and satisfactions awarded by the world reflect a moral organization to the universe or whether they reflect mere accident to which the subject can only submit for better or for worse, whether the subject wants one thing or whether she wants its opposite. As we have seen, the text's reflections take us through a series of oppositions that ought to orient and organize thought and secure a sense of self; indeed, in the powerful attraction to the ideal of self-consistency, one might discern a nearly irresistible impulse to commit to a judgment that would resolve or overwrite these oppositions. One might wish to declare, for example, that the world is a place of wondrousness and pleasure, that the cosmos enjoys a moral organization that will be revealed in the fullness of time, that vision contributes reliably to our knowledge and power, that our mothers do in fact love us and look generously upon our demerits, that successful eye surgery is not a thing to be regretted and that the inverse of these positions can be set aside as false or anomalous. At the same time, in the very effusiveness of its writing, Cixous's text evinces a force in its fragility, in the sense she describes in "The Laugh of the Medusa" [23] (p. 886). The wild currents in the writing sustain an undecided suspension between the two terms of her oppositions. The existential truths exposed by her

myopia—for example, a girl’s vulnerability and finitude while facing a world that gives or refuses itself according to an inscrutable logic—these truths remain true even after her surgery, though the seeing may be blind to these facts¹⁴. The truth exposed by the myopia persists and a lapse into blind or blinkered confidence would betray this truth. Cixous’s text offers the thought that the two terms of her binaries belong strangely together, if we can think this belonging with the uncanny, disconcerting, discohering force that she wishes to preserve in it. Indeed, we might better say that, preserved in their mutual strangeness and yet together nonetheless, the two terms of her oppositions remain unresolved and so are rather more than strange—they are, so to speak, “strangerly” together.

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Notes

- ¹ Readers of Cixous will note that this stance is also widely present elsewhere in her oeuvre, sometimes through the figure of the *entredeux*—or the in-between. See Boon’s essay, “Vulnerability, Longing, and Stigma in Hélène Cixous’s *The Day I Wasn’t There*”, for an illuminating point of entry for this general problematic [5].
- ² For a useful brief biography of Cixous, see Suleiman and Hilfrich [6]. For a critical analysis of this scene, see Rabourdin, who reads it for the resonance of its architecture, but she also suggests, along the way, a subtle Oranais pun in “The great woman in gold”: *La grand femme en or*. . . with “en or”, as an echo of Oran [7].
- ³ For basic facts on the history of Oran’s Joan of Arc statue, see Van Tilburg [8].
- ⁴ For a clear presentation of Vichy policy toward Algerian Jews, see ANU Museum [9].
- ⁵ For a fine meditation on Cixous’s relation to her father, see Debrauwere-Miller [10].
- ⁶ For an excellent excavation of this history, see Kilgore’s “Joan of Arc as Propaganda Motif from the Dreyfus Affair to the Second World War” [13].
- ⁷ In her superbly informative article, “Complex Compatriots: Jews in Post-Vichy French Algeria”, Choi describes the special insecurity of French Algerian Jews between the 1940s and Algerian independence in 1962, and she does so especially in terms of their worrisome potential repudiation by metropolitan France: “What most Jews feared was not the loss of French Algeria itself but a loss of their French affiliation and civil status” [14] (p. 4). We note that Cixous’s mother and brother seem to have been unusual among French-assimilated Algerian Jews in that they cherished hopes for retaining a place for themselves in independent Algeria. After independence, Cixous’s mother was among the very few Jews who remained; in 1971, she was expelled and joined Hélène in Paris [6].
- ⁸ For a thoughtful reflection on the challenge of human dependence, both in a general context and in the specific contexts of childhood and disability, see Kittay [16] (pp. 54–58).
- ⁹ My account here of *jouissance* owes much to the work of the analysts at Gifric in Québec: Willy Apollon, Danielle Bergeron, and Lucie Cantin. For one published elaboration of this work, see Apollon [17].
- ¹⁰ For a theoretical elaboration of this aspect of demand, see Jacques Lacan [18] (p. 691).
- ¹¹ Psychoanalysis has much to say on this necessary, if often maladaptively realized, subjective longing for coherence in a world of flux—readers will be familiar with Lacan’s essay on the mirror stage as one foundational text on this theme. In the context of French feminist thinking about fantasy and the subject, the work of Luce Irigaray serves as another useful touchstone, as I have elaborated elsewhere. See Robert Hughes, “Irigaray’s Figures” [19] (pp. 34, 35).
- ¹² Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny” was translated into French as “L’Inquiétante Étrangeté”, which we might render in English as “The Disquieting Strangeness”. Shortly after its appearance, Cixous published her own essay on the topic, see Hélène Cixous, “La fiction et ses fantômes” [20]. Anglophone readers are referred to Hélène Cixous, “Fiction and Its Phantoms” [21].
- ¹³ Readers of Cixous will recognize that her large oeuvre is much preoccupied with this theme. Verena Andermatt Conley observes that, for Cixous, the concept of a unified subject implies “a unity linked to death through negation of the other” [22] (p. 10).
- ¹⁴ There is a rich bibliography of memoirs written by persons facing visual challenges. It is not uncommon to find reflections there suggesting that such challenges yield insights that are less available to the sighted. For a recent example of an author living productively with the ambiguity of his condition, see Andrew Leland, *The Country of the Blind* [24]. Another recent title to reflect on these issues in a more scholarly mode is M. Leona Godin’s *There Plant Eyes* [25].

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