

HÉLÈNE CIXOUS
ABSTRACTS
AND BRIEF CHRONICLES
OF THE TIME

I
LOS, A CHAPTER

TRANSLATED BY
BEVERLEY BIE BRAHIC

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polity

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**ABSTRACTS
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OF THE TIME**

*To my children, without whom never,
me*

TO MY READERS

This book is a chapter of *The-Book-I-Don't-Write*. It is the first chapter to have presented itself but, in the end, I'm almost sure, it will not be chapter one; among all the chapters none will be more first than any other.

There is a book I call *The-Book-I-Don't-Write* that I've been dreaming of for over thirty years. It is the master, the double, the prophet, almost the messiah of all the books I write at its call. This book precedes me and sums me up. It collects all my lives and all my volumes. It haunts and guides me.

I have often spoken of it to my friends. You know. It was always my promised book and therefore desired and despaired of, the shadow preceding each of my footsteps. I myself am the shadow of my shadow. Stendhal had to turn himself into a certain Henry Brulard to write his *My*

Life,* bringing together all the pieces of the life of Henri Beyle. One can only write the *My Life Book* by taking oneself apart and putting oneself back together, laughing all the while.

Jacques Derrida would say of this book: the one you don't write writes itself differently. I would have liked to see it one of these days before I die. I've renounced. It's the only thing I've ever wanted, the only thing I've ever renounced. It has never left me. It was like an immortal that has never known what it is to be born. I have never seen it face to face. I see it shining behind a veil, its indecipherable back, upright on heaven's bookshelf, its elegant silhouette, utterly foreign, utterly familiar, of future revenant. I've always thought it would come, naturally. When? After all my deaths? Just before, or just after, the last of my deaths.

Thus I've never had the eyes to see it face to face, the living, seeing eyes, able to look, without weeping, at all the visages of the Visage of god-the-all, otherwise known as *My Life*. (One understands why Stendhal in the guise of Beyle only thought about "his" "life" as *his* intimate foreigner.)

The Book that contained me, me and my lives, was with me, ahead of me, beyond me, walking like a misty, indistinct column, more myself than me, an all-powerful soul without an envelope, a too-naked letter, which I might almost have been able to read, but differently.

* *My Life*: in English in the original French text. Throughout *Los, A Chapter* words and phrases appear in English in the original French text. Most are identified in the endnotes but will not be signaled in the text.

These past few years, I no longer waited for it. I'd resigned myself. *That's when.*

It's always when, and only when, one has been through despair, which never stops hoping, and when one has acquired calm, that the absolutely Unexpected happens. That's when:

This book presented itself, all of a sudden, "one fine morning," all written, hovering just outside the window of my study, clearly constituted, like the at-term delivery of a dream from the head of a dream. Quickly, without taking my eyes off it, I copied it down, staying scrupulously close to its notations, its rhythms, its moments of silence. I found it. Just as you see it.

This is one petal of the Book-I-Don't-Write. A petal. Detached from the rest of the flower of the Book. *Los*, as my mother would say in her German language. *Los*: detached. That is, arriving: mobile: autonomous: destined. The instant of a life. An instant is always a present.

This is not a tale. It is *a today itself*, whatever its date, its action, its duration. It is a synchrony. A symphonic instant: it happens here-and-now, at top speed. Because of its condensation, its leaps, its eternal youth, because it hurries, like memory's revenant, one could take it for a dream. It is all true.

Carlos is entirely true. Is an instant.

Every instant is equally the present.

It is a petal detached from the flower of my life.

The detaching happened by accident. The book-chapter-petal was torn off the flower by the violent blow of a death.

In truth, it owes its literary setting-free literally to

death. Life which gives death, or rather that rends it, this life born of death, might this be literature?

If Carlos hadn't died suddenly, dead of sudden death, carried away in an hour in time's river, the one that runs out, it might never have found itself alive in the world of petals of books.

Suddenly, that morning, I saw the universe of *The-Book-I-Don't-Write*: it is an infinity of presents. It is structured like a flower.

In this flower the petals are unnumbered pages.

The petal is also a flower. It is at once a page that is part of a structured whole and a separate individual, a flower of the flower.

My editor asks me if I already know what the next chapters will be. I see some of them, through the window, I say. Several are almost loose. They are already living, I sense. A gust of wind, not me, will decide, soon.

Hélène Cixous

*Let them be well used; for they are the abstracts
and brief chronicles of the time.*

Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2

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The night I am prepared for mama's death I think I am losing her, I lose her, in the end she comes back, and as if in exchange that morning, to my astonishment, I find I have lost a friend, a friend more than a friend, a lover more than a lover, a comrade in adventures, I don't know how to say what he meant to me, what was, what is, tongue stammers heart too, who? who it is, kill, a great actor, a tactor, in which language to tell who, as we know from *Macbeth's* second act, to kill to tell, there are only the *nors*, *Tongue nor heart*, carnage, the stuttering snore of impotence, I don't know which tense to choose to write a story cut in two halves, one dead the other resuscitated, I don't know what he is, was, will have been, will be, once from death incredibly resuscitated. So long as he lived, he was as if dead, I was tranquil, far from remembering, far from forgetting. He lived with me, Rue Lhomond. Yestoday.

To come back to my mother, on the 14th when mama warned me she was going to die that night, I hadn't, it seems to me, dreamed of him for years, I'm sure I hadn't feared for him, I now realize that I thought of him as immortal, someone I had no fear of losing, maybe he was inalterably conserved in one of those fate-free zones, where our near and dear whom fiction appropriates dwell dipped in golden wax, preserved in a cube of time that resists reminiscence and forgetting equally, he remained at 4 Rue Lhomond as in a palace of life, a Xanadu I must

have walked past a hundred times without stopping, as I pass but once a year Place de la Concorde, our sacred place, I even instinctively avoid going there, for fear I'll exhaust its golden charm,

I should call it the Sacred Place de la Concorde, or Saint Place, and drive by it just once a year, religiously, with your glittering ghost, my heart, at the wheel. One day I might draw a map of the world and indicate in gold the neighborhoods, shores, castles, cinemas, towers, restaurants, where our characters still live and breathe so strongly that I hear your being under the solitude, alive and hotly disputing beside me, your being though dead who never leaves me.

I was holding her hand, in the dusky room, I was laughing. She was saying: you laugh but I am not laughing. She was lying down. "I am scared of dying and you not being there. I feel the time has come. I am not laughing you are laughing. What are you writing?" I am writing what you are saying. "When it is time it is time. If I am going to die you weep. Now and then you look to see if I am still here." Half an hour later I stopped laughing, I was beginning to believe her. Mama doesn't tell fibs. This is the first time she has announced an expiry date. I see nothing. She sees something I don't see. When it is time it is time. A statement which imposes its pure authority. Now is the *hour*. She is faceless, soundless. The hour lures. A non-presence, a morsel of sly dry threadbare silence, a distraction, I should have known. I was waiting. Nothing. Thus she will play with me. I stretched a fine, discreet terror like a gauze across the room, the idea that I must not, could not not be at mama's side at the moment of

no next moment. Here it is: you cannot bid each other farewell. This is the first time in my life that I am here at the same time as the time that doesn't come. I take notes. Mama speaks and speaks. She pours out all the thoughts and words she had set aside during this past year so poor in words. This rich supernatural dictation seems to end with the words: "You don't know what's going on. Whether it is tomorrow or today" – *seems*, for the next words: "best to fall asleep this evening," I didn't hear. An invisible fish feeling comes over me, I lean toward the sea,

Did I sleep? Did I die? I ceased. One loses consciousness before having lost consciousness. At a certain moment the past surpasses the present.

Next morning she is in full survival mode.

– *Was ist los?* says my mother. What's happening? What's not happening?

If death knocked, she was not let in. Probably she dropped by to take a look at her subject. We "sensed" her, if one can say one senses that one doesn't sense. *Los*.

Nothing surprises me any more, not life, not death, still everything surprises me, time has the form of an internal city, I live at several addresses, I have several selves to house, I visit myself diversely.

strange happiness, it is raining, this will be the first time we've made love in the rain, I tell myself, I let the Cemetery man walk away, quickly I join you. Your tomb not wet, no explanation. I put some lily of the valley atop your sex, more or less. I lay down on top of you. Take you in my mouth, as usual. Stand up, take me in your bones. Your voice hurries: Wait! Wait! I imagine him running through the hidden rooms, hallways perhaps. I wait. And here he is now, bright and clear despite his spectral cords which murmur our words close to my diaphragm. Isaac! I lick your ears, your toes, as fancy dictates. We are absolutely alive. We go off – generally you stay lit up in me for days – under a combative sun that tugs at clouds and bursts out laughing.

I lied during the night. When mama asked me: "What are you doing tomorrow?" I said: I'm going to see the eye doctor. I didn't say: I'm going to the cemetery to see Isaac. Telling the truth seemed to me violent. Soon I'll have several cemeteries to go and spend my lives in. I'm sorry I lied. It's as if I'd killed mama a little. After that, I said, I'll stay with you. Which is eternally true.

Mama has grown older since the 14th. I used to think she'd reached the oldest of old ages. I yield to the evidence: the work of aging is interminable. The parchment is each day re-devoured, re-freckled, oxydized, rusted. In the evening I kiss crusts of cheeks. A strange contrary life nibbles on the epidermis, rushes to keratinize each millimeter of what yesterday was called skin, and becomes

moldy leather, pocked cloth. Someone in the cornered body won't let go. The flesh is in tatters, the thighs' ragged coverings are stuck together, adrift, having lost all memory of their function. The face is the scene of divided powers: all the traits, the caved-in structure, belong to the Great Rag and Bone Picker, but the eyes live on, sparkle, seek, are astonished, call, stay afloat. Nothing surprises me now: not life, not death. Meanwhile everything surprises me.

On the 15th the Radio quacks its morbid, colorless morning litanies, pours out its daily slop of cadavers, I lend it my deafness, vomit your bubble-wrapped catastrophes, whore of morning. Such is my indifference to its indifference that I don't take in a single sound.

That's when it comes

– A telegram for you. – A telegram? They still exist? – But *listen!* says the Radio. It's for you, the knife. Quit dodging it. – So hit me! I can't read. – You've received the blow already the haggard eye. – I did receive a blow, but I'm not sure, I don't feel a thing, was it me it hit? I fear it is. What does it say? – Shall I repeat? – Yes, yes, repeat, I want it, it's for me. – I repeat: "*Is dead. No last chapter.*" This time I wake up with a piece of my heart sliced off. Los: dead.

And at the corner where my two lives cross death a third soul quickly rises.

*When love, with one another so
Interanimates two souls
That abler soul, which thence doth flow*

And in fifteen seconds you will hear the famous writer's name, the author of twenty-two novels,