

Hélène Cixous

Double Oblivion of the  
Ourang-Outang



DOUBLE OBLIVION OF  
THE OURANG-OUTANG

HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

TRANSLATED BY SUZANNE DOW

WITH THE COLLABORATION OF LUCY GARNIER

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**DOUBLE OBLIVION OF THE  
OURANG-OUTANG**

## PREFACE

Fifteen years ago, in 2009, I found a cardboard Box lain dormant for over half a century in the depths of a cupboard in the house where I go to write, which turned out, just like its ancient double the Gold-Bug, to be the bearer of a treasure of whose existence I had known absolutely nothing. I could have died without ever having laid eyes on that Box again. Now, I can see myself again on that June day in 2009, aghast upon finding hundreds of pages, of varying thicknesses and dimensions, of the first of all my manuscripts which, however, I had thrown out, or so I thought, in 1964, or so I thought, at the time when in 1964 I was discovering with delicate jubilation the hundreds of faces of the manuscripts of James Joyce ‘preserved’ in the cardboard boxes of the Buffalo library. A still unravished treasure, I can see myself *today exactly* as in 1964, transported by an ecstasy of stricken wonderment, seeing it borne towards me by an overwhelming force. It is odd. In time, I will think of myself as having ceded to a supernatural authority, like the one that drove Mr Earnshaw, upon finding

the unnameable Subject (subsequently named Heathcliff) on a Liverpool street, to take him home, *at once*. In all his life, nothing will have so exhausted him, he casts himself down into an armchair, begging all around him without exception not to approach him for he is, so to speak, dead, as well as mortal and murderous. All those around him are already lit up by the mortal emanations of the Subject. The Subject has a power all his own, stronger than those of all around him put together. What is striking is that the Subject, even as he is stationed in the middle of the study, is content to gaze around him, seeming astonished to be there, motionless, as if in truth he were not there, as if his sheath were set down in this place whilst his soul ran wild and uncoupled from reality in climes where oblivion, solitude and abandonment reign.

But I was telling you about a manuscript.

Now, this manuscript was that of a book, written in my hand perhaps, but otherwise not at all. I can see myself trembling with happy grief at the sight of innumerable traces drawn by the hand of my friend J. D. I had entirely forgotten. It was a little yellowed 'book', it looked to have come from the ends of the earth, and no one could have told me whence, towards whom, nor by whom it came. I began, I cannot recall how, to contemplate, or listen to, the disjointed murmurs of this manuscript. I believe that I believed I recognized certain voices. Besides, I was not alone in this voyage on the island of memory. I was in the company of a Society of those highly powerful People of Letters whom *nothing escapes*, those famous ghostly artists – Emily Brontë of course, Edgar Poe and so Charles Baudelaire too and therefore Charles Meryon, Kafka, I am forgetting some of course, but they will come back to me as long as we return to the path of the Box.

And what of the Ourang-Outang?

Within every sensitive soul (sailor, poet, invalid) there is always a great ape and a tomb. As long as none tries to relieve

him of his razor blade, with which he signs, the Ourang-Outang is no killer. That man is gentle as a lamb as long as we believe in *his reality*. But if anyone should suspect that there is an Ourang-Outang in him, he cuts. There is also the fable of the *Monkey Who Becomes a Writer* in La Fontaine, but the Monkey there is only a baboon.

The brigands, the thieves who break into the house at night, the ghosts of whom you are afraid as you are getting into bed, are all descended from the Ourang-Outang. We are all of us afraid of ourselves.

You will have gathered by now that this story is an Ourang-Outang. We cannot blame him for the violence he does us. We have taught him how to use a razor blade, and he wields it to shave away at our hearts. The man who is a shadow of a man, the entirely innocent convict, he whom we cannot blame for tearing us limb from limb, for slitting our throats, for forcing us upside down up into the chimney, our extranatural hero, is this Story to which I drew closer, towards which I was drawn by my fate, I was eleven years old, when it was all over I went to see it at the zoological gardens, we all bore the scars, I clung onto the bars of the book, I stared at it in this barred proximity, I contemplated its eyes so very pale behind which the Unexplained lay sleeping for eternity. It was a neutral, de-commissioned pity for us all, the killed, the killers, the locked away, those driven mad by madness, those by unmadness, a soapwashed, disinfected pity enclosed us. The trickiest thing to decipher is the force of the force of attraction that has always commanded me not to shy away from the unfathomable, too-bright gaze of the Very Powerful. In the end, will I, consciously, have re-read the Story that nonetheless *was read*? For it was read by someone (in me) who had the strength that I have not.

When it is all over, we shut the innocent monster up in a big zoological box.

*Hélène Cixous, 14 April 2024*

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## **PART I**

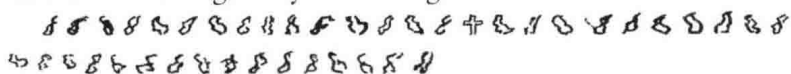


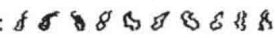
‘So I will have re-read it.’ I instantly wrote that sentence. As one might write down a prophecy. Begrudging, yielding. That was the first thing I did in the moment that followed the Event. I doubted not that I could already foresee its most distant – or so I thought – and surprising consequences, and was already setting off towards the end. Naturally. Not only had it all already begun, with the vast and majestic suddenness of a dawning of the world, with a profusion of pasts still entirely present and richly adorned; more than this, it seemed to me, in that moment I was forewarned of the last of the *future events*. My state of mind: excitement and sorrow intermingled. The Box was still in the middle of the room, scalding. It could not escape me. I could not escape it. I thought to myself. It is I who have brought it into the centre of my life, I said to myself.

I was entirely given over to my sentence by now. I went towards it.

‘So I will have re-read it.’ No. The moment the sentence was written – ‘will have’, not ‘would’ or ‘must’ – I set feverishly about rewriting it. It’s all in the intonation. Perhaps I ought to whisper it at the end of a breath, blast it out in a crescendo yell, pronounce it broken in the middle, shout out the last stolen syllable, or be wail it, in tone it, incredulously. And yet there is also a note of triumph, someone here has won out over someone or something, so I should give it emphasis, so I will have re-read it, exclaim it, *So I will have re-read it*,

surprise it: ‘re-read it??’, let it fall back down and gather in the descent a shower of sparks!!!! or rather!!!!!! This has already been done. Here I remember the hand-written grief of Saint-Simon gravely mourning his wife so:



I had seen this line of tears in the manuscripts room of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and I had wept. I was overcome with adoration for the memorialist whose finest sentence will have been the beyond of any sentence, a stream of *hand-drawn tears* lined up, all in a row, like severed heads on days of mourning. Like so: 

within the body of the writing, at heart height, a belt of tears in single file, in the last quarter of a long traditional page, remarkable for the regularity of the handwriting that gives the chronicle the look of a regiment, just as they sprang forth during the un-broken labour, they had awaited their turn to take up their place in line after two military lines and the words: ‘*un excellent off. gl. et un très galant hom*’<sup>1</sup> followed by a full-stop. They had at that moment, one after the other, been poured into the eternal treasure trove of literature. A tribute and unique example of the interweaving of life into writing – of life, which is to say of death, the arrival of the event and its instantaneous deposition. I counted them. There are thirty-four of them to the line. In addition to those, on the same line, in the margin, there are eight tears, the last of them hurried, withheld, shed. I should perhaps not count as a tear the sixteenth of them, which is drawn in the shape of a cross, but a cross with an open body that flows like a tear, it is a cross the same size as the neighbouring tears, of which there are fifteen on one side and eighteen on the other, each

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<sup>1</sup> ‘An excellent g.<sup>al</sup> off. and a most gallant gentlem.’

trembled and fallen differently, thirty-three or -four tears, plus another eight in the margin, which makes forty-two tears including the cross, rendingly hewn, leaning to the left or right, contorting their own lines, choking themselves, breaking up, knotting; forty cries drawn up in a line, neatly collapsed, painstaking convulsions, a cemetery tragic in its veracity, its servility, admitted to the edifice of the narrative and not banished and penned in as is, save for exceptions, the fate of woes when they come to suspend the weave to which the author grants the privileges of fidelity. Of this splicing of the flesh there was nothing that could be related in letters, nothing that flows in words, but only in droplets and mucus. And yet those tears are letters wept, jewels of the alphabet of sobs, I said to myself, each one is the quintessence of a memory coming asunder, and I wept – with joy.

Next line: *L'Assemblée extraordinaire du Clergé qui finissait vint haranguer le Roi à Marly.*<sup>2</sup> He will not have wasted a single tear, I said to myself, nor a word.

I can see at this point that I shall need to add to the sentence 'So I will have re-read it' a note of mourning, the bejewelled hue of what one has lost. To hear in 'So I will have re-read it' the aura of regret at having thus ceased not re-reading. It's all there in the 'oh' of the *so*, sounding the death knell of grace. Soh/why. And with this I start following with variations the multiple music encapsulated in this endless sigh. 'In the end, I will have re-read' – I wrote – 'the book that I had thought never to re-open' and it seemed to me for a moment that this phrase, in its eschatological phosphorescence, had quite evidently to be stationed at the opening of the book that I had not yet begun writing, but whose slender young shadow had

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<sup>2</sup> 'The extraordinary synod of the Clergy that was drawing to its end came to harangue the King at Marly.'

been following me for days now. Then it wavered and began again: 'The book that I had promised myself I would sooner die than read – in the end, I will have re-read it *so*.' Hurriedly, I set to once again, tried a form, flung out the re-adjusted sentence, (at)tempted another fate; fitful, laying siege to the fervour that straitened my heart from all sides, I tailed it with a spume of words, turning about the grievous spot, drunk with irrepressible imprecision, in hopes of finding a phrasing simple and powerful enough to bring together the conflicting anxieties to which the Event gave rise in me. (That is, the improbable Box's so unorthodox, seemingly cunning, entry into my life.)

(How far I have been caught off guard cannot be put into words. Without forewarning or foreboding, at least as far as I know, no omen, nor dream, at least as far as I recall: an Event has presented itself without intermediary, without messenger, in the most homely of fashions.

Naturally I cannot but perceive, a few paces behind today's astonishment, the Great Astonishment, that of the year 1996, to which this one might for a brief moment seem to be a reply. But while the principal magical accessory of the Great Astonishment of 1996 will have turned out to be a box, the events are in all aspects different, including the trigger. There are events, and boxes too. The box of 1996 was an old dirty blue box, the size of a shoe-box, but square, and which had never been in my possession nor, in truth, in the possession of my brother, its bearer, since he had, of his own accord, disappropriated himself thereof in another story. Whilst the Gold-Box neither reached me, nor was delivered, nor brought to me. It never ceased being there without being here. Until the moment when it *emanated*. And it is this moment that provokes me and calls me into question. Myself, the whole

house, and so the theatre and temple of all my books, the setting for all my life's catastrophes and comedies. Had I forgotten it? No. Neither forgotten nor not forgotten. The Box is going to force me to rethink the subtle, so subtle concept of forgetting, I thought. I could already foresee a very feverish meditation on the Forgetting of Boxes (or the unforgetting – that is, the different forgettings and forgettances) awaiting me, flicking at a ream of paper with excitable fine, feline tails. I haven't thought about the box of 1996 since 1998, and it is the discovery of this so very different Box that brings it back from amongst the shadows.)

(Once again: I came back – let's say yesterday – to the house that is more than a house and less than a house since it is my writing chest –

it seems to be a house, with its little rooms, its narrow beds, its few cupboards, it has room enough for its occupants but is quite plainly booked out. Its permanent residents are my books, my true friends. My books, that is my friends, live in delightful society, which serves as a well-tended forest, a company of oracles, a protective cortège. By contrast the kitchen, through which I cannot help but pass, is the jumble of Capernaum itself – the locality where Jesus my mother exercises her healing powers beset as she is by the throng of objects sick with age and stiff with ailments and tics, whose unruly, unwashed, battered, profoundly righteous heap earns her – my mother – a reputation as an enchantress and glory as a worker of miracles.

But I'll get back to arriving at the house: when, yesterday, I reach it, as usual, after the annual shipwreck, I have nothing left, the head empty, the body broken, the heart heavy, I have lost battles, the world is strewn with excrement, I am in the

ruined state of the survivor and near lifeless. But confident. 'I shall have a book' I tell myself. As unhappy as I may be and forever so the happy god is oakful with his train of squirrels. A pinecone is fired at my back. Fifty! Seventy! I count, on all my fingers, some come to me, others I borrow from friends. I have nothing and I shall have everything. Is this possible? Ah well, this nothing, this poverty, these ruins, these inures, I shall endure them willingly even as lifeless, so expected is it that I should expectantly await myself upon the coming of a book. I do not show my belly to those I meet; they would not believe me. Nor do I look at it myself. I scrutinize nature, mysterious mistress of resurrections. Whence shall it spring forth, the miraculous happening? Far away in the east winks the little red eye of the lighthouse, saying: believe! believe! believe! at regular intervals. I believe believe believe believe

(this does nothing to keep a terrible despair from crouching down in tears next to me) (the pain grows in screeching the deep blue expanse of belief)

It will come, I believe. I haven't even any curiosity. As if I were an incubating hen, distracted, patient, in the warm fullness of her divine henness.

And yet yesterday, the book that I was preparing to feel on its way from the outermost limits of the universe, at the moment when I saw myself seeing – as Stendhal perfectly did the white wall four kilometres from here at the moment that will have preceded – him crouched in white trousers on that mountain – ridiculously named *Janiculum* – the crystallization of the book that will come to me – far from being out on parade, roaming free in castles in forests beneath a few cloths of white cloud, it was already as close as could be. The



Book. I could almost have been sitting on it unbeknownst to me.)



I would so have liked.

I would so have liked a great many things. And in the end in vain. I would so have liked to have drawn out of my trembling the sentence with so fine a head, so long and supple a neck, the very image of a rose the very image of an arrow which, in a single stroke, would paint true the singular sharp of a sundering. I was indeed sundered. Stripped, split and slashed.

I had The Box in my sights – I can hear myself.

I had sundered for myself the impassibility whereof I had until this day – which seemed in no way destined to become memorable – been able to attest to the solidity, quiet, constancy, sleepiness, withstanding all mistrust. You sleep and suddenly you sink. It is 28 June, a Sunday, and we have struck a rock. Interior. The Box is not to blame; it was sought out, set upon. An interior, utterly inexplicable event. Suddenly we sink beneath time's cubits.

To myself I say: 'So I will have re-read it.' Myself judge, accused and executor. This might be laughed, blushed, wept, scoffed at. A sententious, bitter stench. To throw oneself on a Box in the early hours and eviscerate oneself. The accident gave off such a force of death – or else of life –, such a Force – that I was thrown stuck onto this moment that had caught me in its brutal amber as in myths where one sees people captured in a salt or in the plaster of immortality. Women mostly.