

■ HÉLÈNE

CIXOUS

Love Itself

in the Letterbox



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LOVE ITSELF
IN THE LETTER BOX

BY HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

TRANSLATED BY PEGGY KAMUF

polity

First published in French as *L'amour même dans la boîte aux lettres* by
Hélène Cixous © Editions Galilée, 2005

This English edition © Polity Press, 2008

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-07456-3988-8
ISBN-13: 978-07456-3989-5 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.75 on 14 pt Adobe Janson by Servis Filmsetting Ltd,
Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

Ouvrage publié avec le concours du Ministère français chargé de la culture –
Centre National du Livre.

Published with the assistance of the French Ministry of Culture –
National Centre of the Book

LOVE ITSELF

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I

OLIVIER DE SERRES – A SINGLE PASSION TWO WITNESSES

I passed in front of Olivier de Serres which saddens me you say I try to recapture exact details in the flesh but I can't picture the place remains the same you say,

The scene-that-remains one day you were returning from vacation I fell upon you we made love on the floor I remember the texture of your skin you say which saddens me remains the texture

we are sitting on The Divan all of a sudden we fall upon the scene-that-remains, I lean over I see you fall all of a sudden on her me who I was, it is there! this brilliant scene returned to fall in front of us, it/she is on the floor on the carpet, it/she is on your face, I see us on your face look at us falling all of a sudden, there. I thought, I remember: thus, he returns – thus he has come out of disappearance, he has returned from his non-returning – I remember I thought: all is well, I sinned, I didn't believe and god is the unbelievable, I thought: thus he returns, the one who will never return, at that moment the thing (of) my soul fell into the height of the sky, you throw a little pebble into the sky and that's me

I am afraid of you and I fear you I abandon myself by not expecting you each time that you return I'm knocked over backwards by it you have me falling at your feet, I thought, struck by lightning I thought all the same, I have always thought under lightning, then you gave me a reed, a kind of stylus pen while saying to me "I wasn't expecting 'that'" you were not forewarned of this return, I say – which return? you say – yours I say

You don't remember what precedes never, I thought, sitting, on The Divan, always on your right flank, our knees rubbing lightly against each other, but I say nothing to you, I look at you look at us fall in the scene-that-remains, your lips suck the sugared flow of the thing that happened that comes back up always by way of the mouth, comes to lick the tongue and reawaken words, I look at your lips, you suck at memory's nipple, "the two witnesses" I say to myself, we are the two witnesses of ourselves, the two witnesses of the scene-that-remains, not bearing the same witness, a single scene makes for two scenes.

– Then you gave me a reed, that is to say a pen.

– Me? I gave you a pen?

– It's a metaphor I say. I said to you: no one will ever write the taste of this scene, and you said to me, "give me something to eat, now."

I was always afraid that my mother would suddenly enter.

Or, in order, my son, then my daughter.

There are seven fears at the doors and windows of my life, and a terror that fills my chest and entrails, that's you.

To come back to the two witnesses. There was no place more like a temple than Olivier de Serres, a dark and necessary little studio. Temples are places that spend their time trembling, splitting apart and caving in, catching fire, collapsing, rising back up and their foreheads are touched by the wings of jackdaws that howl postprophetically: they see misfortunes coming only after the fact

- Rise and measure the Temple as a *remainder*, you say
- As I recall, it could not have been larger than 15 m².

When struggles take place in a small room they are all the more terrible, one is in a grotto, a cellar, a cell, a hut

the walls are crumbling, they show traces of soot, Olivier de Serres was tiny, a hole in a dead-end street, with some English furniture. That's where we prophesized, mouth to mouth, you bite me, it's always you who bite, bite, bite, I didn't dare. On my side I drank I swallowed your book, in my mouth it had the sweetness of honey, but right afterwards my entrails were bitter because I was jealous of my own mouth. It swallows everything and keeps nothing I thought. But I never dared say to you: I want to swallow your sperm and keep it outside me at the same time. My too little my everything my not enough.

To come back to the two witnesses. The two restorer-demolisher heroes of the Temple, tenants of Eternity for a few hours, those of whom it is said: "These are *the two olive trees* and the two torches *standing before the Lord of the earth*" who are they? Who are we? We are Thursday, February 12, 2005.

People have spoken of Moses and Elijah, Peter and Paul. Names. And we?

We, the names, we left them outside right away. We call ourselves: you, or else we. You, you, and we. Each time I say: we, I am afraid, I fear you and I fear fate. Who can swear to "we"? No one. "We," I say timidly and imprudently and I scrutinize your face to see if it's OK.

In forty years, on average forty times a year, that makes one thousand six hundred control checks.

- You remember? you say.

- Yes, I say, I believe so. I'm recalling this moment I remember it living, hastily, I bite into it, it's February 12, 2005, blue sweater, gray shoes, 4:30 in the afternoon, themes: "solitudes" "invention," "the last time," the-last-time-that-we-the-first-

time-that-we-thought-or-said-explicitly "it's-the-last-time," I remember this moment, brief shelter of time, we are sitting on the divan and I recall that we are sitting on the divan at that moment you lay your head once more on my right shoulder, remember this instant I say to myself, a supply of joy for several days. Meanwhile I recall with you I believe, I believe I know what recalls itself to you, this very little scene, it's our child and our childhood, it would be terrible if we had forgotten it, it would be infanticide, at the time we didn't know that we had conceived a tenuous but very powerful child, we bent down over her, over him, over the photo, there I say in this moment, you have the same empty look that Abraham had when he looks at Isaac for the last time: the texture of his skin. That's already a lot for memory, it's already the essential.

– You remember what? I say.

– It was the end of a summer you were returning I threw myself upon you, I will never forget this is the first time that I tell you this memory, you say.

Each time it/she returns to him, it's the first time, the mystery of this scene is its power to return to him each time for the first time

I never say that this scene has already taken place, the scene where he remembers the memory of childhood for the first time, that's the charm, his charm and that of the scene.

It returns every three years, for the first time it must have a secret periodic rhythm.

Little by little this scene, the unique one, and its scene of repetition take on a grandeur, little by little the scene and its second time are elevated to the sacred. Repetition adorns it with adoration. The little scene is now one of the greatest scenes in our book

I never say: you told it to me, remember, in the Japanese restaurant. Never! That would be our suicide. I want the springtime. I admire it. It returns each time trembling all over from having crossed cemeteries.

It is the fairy or the feast. We contemplate it in silence as it passes by, brief and blazing ceremony. We fall, sometimes on the ground, sometimes on the carpet, sometimes with eyes wide open as if fascinated sometimes in an expiration

– So you see? We are still there, we say to Someone. In my view it is to Death that we say that, but we do not grant it the name.

The Scene grows.

Something very important must have happened that day the first one, the ancient one. When it comes back, this scene, it is always glorious. This thing must have always returned from among the dead. “Impossible not to live,” it says. It has tried. In vain. It grows.

I never recall it. You are its guardian and its narrator. You bring it back to me.

On April 14, 2004, when the scene suddenly made one of its apparitions, you added a detail to it. We were seated on the divan as usual, you placed your right hand on my left knee. The scene made its entrance.

We made love on the floor.

We made love with this scene.

I never recall any of our scenes with my words. It's you the captain, the head of speech. I do not speak the words I'm thinking of, they remain in the streets, in the airports, in the train stations, phantoms uneasy about their fate. No one will ever know them. I do not dare to give them the right to see the day.

And if you didn't remember them? They would die.

You can forget or not forget, I don't want to exercise over you the right of evocation.

– Let me do it, I'm the head.

– You're the head of *forget-and-remember*. My memory is not as valiant as yours. But I live in my memory. Our memory has two memories. Our memory has two forgettings. You come

into my hut. I go into your memory. Each one at home at the other's

"I let you do it, I let myself be led along I let you make me me I say, as much as it can be done and as possible as it is possible to will – but not always."

All of a sudden I reread all the Bibles, I go, I come, I search, from one language to another I read from Bible to Bible, my Luther, your King James the old little ones, the young big ones, I pass my tongue over them again, I pace back and forth in the deserts, I find again your traces, your ancestries, I know you, I have already encountered you, I have already heard your voice, already I have not seen you, you are a summary of the desert, already I must have crossed you for forty years and it begins again. I find you look like Moses my dog you look like Abraham my cat, your speech is brief, you don't speak you let loose sentences, your poems, that's it: it barks, it spurts. And then the stone-words, the shard-words, the formulas, the capsules containing all of God.

Your language – I always come back to it – is well guarded, I try to part your lips with my tongue or else it's you on my lips, I no longer know what is inside what is outside, are your words in my mouth when I read them in your language, the slightest touch of a syllable has the mysterious power of a penetration.

– **Had I not written my poems in English, would you have loved me?**¹

– What a question!

The whole body of this story, our longshortlife, suddenly folds up, flattens out, hollows out its back, slides itself, like a letter into a box, in a hut where our memory of childhood shines beneath the dust.

¹ Bold characters indicate here, and throughout, English used in the original. (Tr)

The Memory is succinct in lively colors, it comes back alive from the other world when all memories have for so long gone back to sleep. A fugitive dream that looks for a corner in which to settle.

No one knows why certain memories come back alive, others half dead.

You threw yourself upon me as if I had turned round on you as if I had opened a small gap in your thigh, as if you had become convinced that I wanted to devour you like a panther behaving like a real person, which I would never have thought of doing for anything in the world, but overturning the foresight of what it seemed should never be, this moment resembling a dream and yet bearing a powerful reality.

Who could have told me that everything that seemed incredible at Olivier de Serres when we were down there as if knocked over and trampled beneath paws, now forty years later we ourselves would look upon from above like gods looking at the affairs of mortals? And subsequently, when the days in which we are will in turn be part of the past, where? who? seized by a fearful admiration? will we be? our two witnesses? Or like gods watching from the next mountain these two that we will then have been?

When I evoke Olivier de Serres following your lead, I am in the midst of reading *Demeure, Athènes* the strange twice-haunted text by Derrida: haunted once by the death of Socrates who is a beautiful woman, dressed in white, beautiful as her name tall as her soul dressed in daylight, more exactly in the hour of the day's dawning, a second time in truth perhaps the first, by a sentence. This sentence is also tall and beautiful, but for its part or for her part, she does not come, she precedes everyone:

the text, the narrative, the reading, the author, the actors,

the witnesses, she, this sentence, is there before us, when I talk to you about it you too you shiver, you tell me that she is not unknown to you, you have already found yourself in front of her, but as for you, you do not think she is beautiful but hard and authoritarian

"Nous nous devons à la mort," "We owe ourselves/each other to death," it says, she says. The voice is metallic, you say. Whereas I find this voice elastic like the air of a cat acquiescing to the laws of Nature.

How different we are I thought: the same words say things otherwise to us.

The two non-identifiable feminine characters the woman in white and the sentence in the blank, monotone voice give rendezvous to the two heroes, Jacques Derrida and Socrates.

And that, I will never do, *give you a rendezvous*. That is indeed a perfidious, dreadful expression. A rendezvous to you, *à toi?* Never.

The convocation of the two men: their indictment, their conviction, and what is their crime? Life.

And to say that the two feminine characters are so beautiful and so indifferent.

The thrice-beautiful woman, by the way they speak of her I feel they are under her spell, if I were I man I would recognize her, I would be a little bald in appearance but my mouth would be open on a heart-shaped tongue, I would chuckle in delight, my eyes would split apart in the middle of my cheeks for my whole body would be lifted by the voice of my mother, the inedible nourishing dew. And what song does she sing, what song did she sing beforever? "I am life." "My baby my darling my nursling do not fear mama life is here. Every hour I give you is good." Do not fear says the sentence. It's a marvelous text that makes me weep the kind of warm tears that surprise me each time I think I see a weeping child who believes he or she is abandoned.

– I am going to be jealous – Of whom? – Of Jacques Derrida. Of Socrates. One after the other, one theme after the other, life, death.

It's not easy what I am confiding to you here as if to myself, it's made of extreme joy that in the end is sad but without pain.

In the end one always needs one's mother so as to be born on the other side.

– I will always be there, I will say to you, the next time. Even after the door. It's neither a gift nor a promise. It's a natural phenomenon. As durable but no more so than a mountain. You can climb on me for millions of years. I am stable, etched by ravines, immobile, torn and flooded by torrential springs.

I am no more beautiful than I am. On occasion I give up or almost. There was, in the new house that we just bought and which I have not yet even inspected altogether, the morning of our first night, the baby left here by my youngest daughter. It was a baby external to me. When it began to cry in the early morning, I let it cry I had other things to do. All the moving house. Until the moment I saw the little face turn to mush, just like a potato wrinkled by sorrow. Poor thing. So, I picked it up. Its little limbs stuck to my skin, and the baby began to make up part of my body, so I took it into the kitchen to give it some milk. I confess: the *trust* came first from it, it was the baby who took me in its four limbs and filled me with trust. The mother sometimes is the child.

I am not confiding secrets in you. All things are decided and applied by very powerful events lost today in a *forgotten forgetting*, one hasn't any trace of them, but our acts obey. All our acts of faithfulness as of unfaithfulness are commanded by Causes. We don't know them but it is not impossible that they will be revealed to us, one day, suddenly, often very late, in history's story, one has to count on a delay of at least forty-five or fifty years.

I barely knew this child. Between us there had been no

time. When I picked it up it spread throughout my blood in my flesh, at maddening speed, and in a minute it had been in my story forever.

When you fell on me I became a mountain from then on. There had already been a first time. But that was then one time. The time becomes the first only with the second time. The time that was not yet the first, I did not become a mountain. That was in New York in your office. Time: prehistory. One afternoon without expectation without memory without premonition. Without appearance. At least in appearance.

All the times that are destined to become first times are the same in all books. One sees nothing coming. One sees no one. Suddenly it explodes. People whom one did not see enter shove you so hard from behind, some might call them angels, external powers yet who? There is no seduction. You remember nothing and you come to, wounded knowing not where, survivors, a tenth of the city has toppled, beneath the ruins you feel your body you feel the wrong body, you can't do otherwise. You come to. You excuse yourselves. There is no explanation.

You give me Artaud's letters to Genica Athanasiou

– Why do you do that? The next day?

– The next day?

– After. It's a next day, a tomorrow. – The too morrow? – All words open up under the shock, I remember. Each word from your mouth. You say tomorrow in French, *demain*. I look at your *deux mains*, your two hands. I see them. It's the first part of you I see. After, I stop.

– You saw me I say?

We are in 2004. We have come back. Today I can ask you: you saw me?

– You mean? Saw? In what sense? At what moment? No. The first time I saw you I did not see you.

– In the end, I say, I looked at your hands. I wasn't seeing you

Your body, that's a word I would not have said. I clung to your hands so that something human might exist in the chaos.

– What does it mean to say to see? What does to see mean to say? you say. Saturday, June 18, 2004.

All words began to say and most of them were saying: No. The next day you put the letters from A. to G. A. in my letter box.

– I did that?

– You put these letters to me. Look at you look at me look at that. Look at who. I would have liked not to believe you. What broke out suddenly was fire. We heard nothing coming. You give me back a collection of Celan, who is it? I say. At that moment I hear – like an inaudible Voice crying out my name, an interior Voice therefore, I recognize my father's anger: "Come up here!" I raise my leg, that is to say, I want to raise it and it's impossible; strength has gone out of my legs. I can neither go up nor go back. I take my leg in my two hands. I can't lift it.

– Your frightened emotion, you clutch at the sky with my hands as if it were falling on your head breathlessly when I kissed you. I have this image that's alive in June 2004.

– I was afraid it was irreparable. I was afraid it was reparable.

– Was he you or was he me? what did you mean to say? I ask that in June 2004.

– I was afraid you would always be there. I didn't want to tell you that earlier.

– Letters from terror to horror, *l'épouvante*.

It begins with fear. Because of absolute solitude. In New York I experienced the solitude with such violence that I felt like crouching under a café table. The poets who accompanied me, all of them phantoms, don't attack me, don't defend me. I didn't know there was someone in your office; I thought it

was a library. Having read a volume of your poems I would never have thought they had a master. I could have stolen some without its being a theft.

I remember your arrival in the office. I remember the other being that you appeared to be to me then when I had just read the poems with a freedom for which you might reproach me. I had licked them from head to toe, chewed ruminated without paying, they were mine, and suddenly they were yours, they were something of your person that I had taken pleasure with behind your back I had helped myself, as if I had gone into the wrong bedroom, I slept in your bed, your dreams came to me, thereupon you enter, you turn on the light, I jump up, it's not as if I could say: I thought you were dead. I was with your poems and I had no need of you.

When I talk about New York April 14, I get the instinctive urge to reread *A Passion in the Desert*. I begin running around in all directions, there is such a need. I do not remember it at all. – Is it a novel? you say. You do not remember it at all. I remember a few cinders in a blazing fire. Bookstores don't have *Passion*. It increases. Like an order surging out of the Desert of Memory. One obeys. Search. Find. Taste. When I get these orders, by day or night, I always obey. Why wouldn't I obey? I obey the Great Goddess of Forgetting. If I Forgot it's because the thing was tied up with some secret that had been buried alive. A weeping calls faintly to me. It's because I must be in the Myrtle Grove, in Book VI of *The Aeneid*, when Aeneas having descended into the Inferno catches sight of the little wood where those whose harsh love has eaten away their heart with its cruel poison and whose sorrows remain alive in death are hiding. This neutral joy that orders me does not have the sweet taste of cake, but that of the fear of being at fault. The bitter taste of fear.

– How do you write *l'épouvante*? you say to me.

There is a carnage of panthers in the wood, an odor of blood and sunstruck laurel. Males or females? I don't dare