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Critical inventions: the deformed limits of literature and philosophy

Abstract:

This paper questions not just the role theory plays in art, but also that which art plays in theory. Unfolding in a dialogic fashion as it departs from a subversive desire exhibited in the genre-bending works of Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous, it offers a series of performances and '"critical" inventions' (Derrida 1992: 52) designed to deform the limits of literature and philosophy. Prompted by a determination to 'write otherwise' (Derrida 1982: xxiv), it assesses the implications of these interventions and transgressive border-crossings for both critical and creative writings within the naïve academic institution which attempts to hold literature and philosophy, art and theory, apart.

Biographical note:

Stephen Abblitt is a doctoral candidate in the English Program at La Trobe University. His post-critical thesis involves the themes of undecidability, the (il)legitimacy of the critical institution, and the production of meaning as potentiality in the texts of Irish modernist James Joyce and French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. His academic interests also include modernist and experimental literatures, post-criticism and critical-creative writing, and thinking the relationship between literary modernism and deconstruction.

Keywords:

Cixous, Hélène—Derrida, Jacques—Critical-creative writing—Deconstruction—Genre—Literature—Literary criticism and theory—Margins—Philosophy—Post-criticism

Marcel Proust once observed that 'a work in which there are theories is like an object on which one has left the price tag' (Proust, in Bennington and Derrida 1993: 62). The implication is that art and theory should be kept apart. Quoting Proust in the autobiographical essay 'Circonfession,' Jacques Derrida declares this to be 'the grimace of a good taste naïve enough to believe that one can efface the labour of theory' (Bennington and Derrida 1993: 63). If, as Derrida suggests, art and theory will always already have been implicated, does this mean not only that theory makes an incursion into art, but also that art necessarily transgresses the genre boundary separating it from theory? What is the place of 'art' in theory? This is the question both asked and performatively enacted by this paper: What is the relationship between art and theory in the patently 'literary' philosophy of Derrida? And, doubling the narrative, what role might the erosion of such a distinction play in the literary-philosophical works of Hélène Cixous as she bends so many genres to breaking point?

Unfolding in a dialogic fashion as it departs from this subversive desire, and prompted by a determination to 'write otherwise' (Derrida 1982: xxiv), this paper offers a short series of disjointed performances and '"critical" inventions' (Derrida 1992: 52) designed to deform the limits of literature and philosophy, assessing the implications of these interventions and transgressive border-crossings for both critical and creative writings within the naïve academic institution which attempts to hold art and theory apart. Like the twinned columns of Derrida's monumental *Glas*, there is a bifurcated focus, theoretical rather than literal: in one 'column' we are presented with a reading of Derrida's short essay 'Tympan,' concerned with the deconstruction of the borderline between the institution of philosophy and its anti-institutional Other; in the other 'column' we witness a reading lurching between three interstitial figures (Cixous, Antigone, and Molly Bloom) who are each exemplary of a liminal being both inside and outside this institution. As the two columns bleed into one another and the voices become indistinguishable, this paper not only reveals—as it performs—the inextricability of art and theory, but also the inadequacy or incompetency of the critical institution when faced with the revolutionary potential unleashed by such a transgression of the border between the critical and the creative.

—'The chase of truth, that's our eternal conversation' (Cixous 2007: 7). But whose truth? And on whose terms? Whose truth? By whose rules and conventions are we speaking?

—More than a theory, there is an art to the essay 'Tympan.' An approach to philosophy that is manifestly literary in form, this art concerns the porous borders between the two 'genres' ('genres' in inverted commas), a series of transgressions which embody a shared desire to write otherwise, to write against and up against—in opposition to, but also close to, or in proximity to, following the formulation by Jonathan Dollimore in *Sexual Dissidence* (Dollimore 1991: 229)—the naïve conventions of the critical institution. 'Gnawing away at the border,' our purpose must be to 'blur the line which separates a text from its controlled margin' (Derrida 1982: xxiii).

—There is an art too to 'Sorties,' this 'essay' (again: inverted commas) which makes its forays into and launches its attacks on 'philosophical systems' which base themselves on a series of binaries and oppositions. We must intervene 'everywhere (where) ordering intervenes, where a law organizes what is thinkable by oppositions' (Cixous and Clément 1986: 64), using the 'logics' of these logocentric systems against themselves so that 'the

movement whereby each opposition is set up to make sense' also becomes 'the movement through which the couple is destroyed' (Cixous and Clément 1986: 64). We must reshape the discourse as 'a universal battlefield' where 'a war is set loose' (Cixous and Clément 1986: 64) on such oppositions as those between philosophy and its Other, literature and its Other, art and theory, so that the critical institution is no longer able to hold them apart.

—Existing on the margins of *Margins of Philosophy*, 'Tympan' begins by drawing together the noun 'philosophy' with the verb 'to tympanize': 'To tympanize—philosophy' (Derrida 1982: x). Immediately problematizing the status of 'philosophy' by equating it with this neologism which transforms the noun 'tympanum'—the eardrum, the thin membrane the external ear from the middle ear, 'the internal vestibule of … [the philosopher's] ear' (Derrida 1982: xi)—into an active verb, Derrida effectively marginalizes philosophy: that is, he produces philosophy as a discipline concerned with margins (even its own), a discipline concerned with the delineation of borders and limits, but also with what he terms 'being at the limit' (Derrida 1982: x). This 'being at the limit' must necessarily involve an engagement with the possibility of being outside of such liminal spaces, what it means to 'be' beyond these controlled borders, and the possibility of the institution of philosophy opening itself to the discourses of its Other.

— 'If I wrote the way I would like to write, between the coldly analytic passages there would be some utterly fantastical outbreaks' (Cixous 2007: 8).

—The institution craves boundaries, borders; 'If we are to approach [*aborder*] a text, for example, it must have a *bord*, an edge' (Derrida 2004: 67). But the borderlines are always already crossed, porous, broken. The outbreaks are uncontainable.

—Witness, for example, the way geographic placement and the literal crossing of borders is transformed into the crossing of genre-borders, beginning with Cixous' original placement in Algeria, the marginal Francophone world, and her continued 'Algeriance':

> My way of thinking was born with the thought that I could have been born elsewhere, in one of the twenty countries where a living fragment of my maternal family had landed after it blew up on the Nazi minefield. With the thought of the chanciness, of the accidence, of the fall. Lucretius's Rain of atoms, in raining, the atom of my mother had met the atom of my father.

> The strange molecule detached from the black skies of the north had landed in Africa (Cixous 2005: 204).

Born in Oran to parents of Austro-German and Jewish descent, she wanders and errs on her passport, 'a fake' (Cixous 2005: 206), foreign in all places and at home in none. She is 'perfectly at home, nowhere' (Cixous 2005: 209), exiled from the logocentric—or phallogocentric—system which constitutes and polices such borders as those separating native from foreign, and inside from outside. This geographic placement comes to define the theoretical position from which she produces her texts, and the types of marginal texts she produces. She writes something else, something other than that which the critical institution could accept and assimilate. And we must do so too. We must side with the margins, the 'injured' and 'trespassed upon' (Cixous and Clément 1986: 71) and produce polemical 'warlike texts,' fantastically 'rebellious texts' (Cixous and Clément 1986: 71) which decimate the violent oppositions central to this logocentric critical institution.

—Derrida's life too began on these Algerian margins, born into a Franco-Maghreb Jewish family in el-Biar. Gregory Ulmer suggests this geographic placement had a significant impact not only on *what* but on *how* Derrida wrote: 'The fact that he was born in Algiers and spent part of his childhood in "Arabia" … may have something to do with his fusion of theory with literature' (Ulmer 1982: 544). The literary aspects and ludic performativity of Derrida's so-called philosophical texts are inescapable. Geoffrey Hartman observes this tendency toward the transgression of genre-boundaries in *Saving the Text*: Derrida 'blurs genres' so that writing's 'indebtedness to evolved conventions … is threatened' (Hartman 1981: xv). Stephen Muecke employs the term 'ficto-criticism' to describe this hybridised non-genre: 'When criticism is well-written, and fiction has more ideas than usual, the distinction between the two starts to break down' (Muecke 2002: 108). Ulmer refers to this mode as 'post-criticism': breaking with representational realism in criticism, it is 'constituted precisely by the application of the devices of modernist art to critical representations' (Ulmer 1985: 83). Boldly declaring that 'the categories of literature and criticism … [can] no longer be kept apart' (Ulmer 1985: 86), it is a mode which works by performance and exhibition rather than analysis and explanation: it marks a 'shift away from commentary and explanation, which rely on concepts, to work instead by means of examples' (Ulmer 1985: 90). It is a case of producing exemplary rather than exegetical texts, and of violently—and ambiviolently: that is, by way of an interminable play of writing and erasure whereby the writing is 'continually destroying itself as object' (Heath 1984)—refusing to allow the naïve critical institution to any longer hold art and theory apart. As Ulmer notes, a result of this shift is a fundamentally new method of producing critical knowledge: 'As the form which criticism takes when it is art, the essay maintains a distinctive relationship with knowledge— it *mentions* without asserting knowledge' (Ulmer 1982: 588). There is 'a fundamental incompletion' (Heath 1984: 31) in this approach to critical knowledge which refuses the certainty of a philosophical proposition—'these words do not yet form a proposition' (Derrida 1982: x)—and so undercuts the very basis of the critical institution.

—This 'genre' produces undecidable texts—'Writing that is "literary," in other words, undecidabilized, has a status of improbability' (Cixous 2007: 10)—for to *mention* is never the same as to *know*.

—This marginal geographical placement—its influence on Derrida's thought, the texts he produces, and how he produces them—is exhibited in the literal spatiality of the pages upon which 'Tympan' is staged. Like *Glas*, it is constituted of two columns, the blank space in between acting as a porous border where we can witness the so-called split or divide between philosophy and its Other. In *Glas*, the columns are devoted to the German idealist philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, and the French novelist Jean Genet: might the columns of 'Tympan' be a foreshadowing of this later complication of the relationship between an exponent of philosophy and one of literature, and so between the broad 'genres' themselves?

—I have to wonder: which column do I speak from? Do I—can I—speak from either?

—This Other is perhaps represented by a rather poetic expression drawn from the smaller 'second' column of 'Tympan': 'the marblings that bloom on the edges of certain bound books' (Derrida 1982: xi). What Derrida establishes here is the gentle intrusion of these marginal marblings into the philosophical discourse of the larger 'first' column. The content

of these marblings blooming on the edges of this book matters far less than the simple fact of these transgressive non-philosophical interventions and interpolations made from their placement in this 'Other' column.

—Back in the 'first' left-hand column, which is given a false sense of authority by our simple trained tradition of reading the page from left to right, Derrida attempts a definition of 'philosophy' (in inverted commas) which defies the certainty and appropriateness of a definition by questioning the ability or authority of 'philosophy' to define or limit itself:

> Ample to the point of believing itself interminable, a discourse that has *called itself* philosophy—doubtless the only discourse that has ever intended to receive its name only from itself, and has never ceased murmuring its initial letter to itself from as close as possible—has always, including its own, meant to say its limit. In the familiarity of the languages called (instituted as) natural by philosophy, the languages elementary to it, this discourse has always insisted upon assuring itself mastery over the limit (Derrida 1982: x).

Conventionally, philosophy establishes its own limit or limits; the institution patrols and controls its own borders. But to do so it must always already have crossed these borders: 'in order better to dispose of the limit, [philosophy] has transgressed it' (Derrida 1982: x). This is philosophy's aporia, the impasse in its logic: '*Its own limit* has not to remain foreign to it' (Derrida 1982: x). But 'the impasse provides a certain impetus' (Brooke-Rose 1990: 25), as Christine Brooke-Rose writes. Certainly these borders do not prove to be an impasse for either Derrida or Cixous.

—Nor do these borders prove an impasse to the exemplary anti-state, anti-authority, and anti-institutional counter-figure Antigone. Derrida's a-concept *différance*—which 'does not exist … in any form,' before and outside of the kingdom of concepts (Derrida 1982: 6)—will always already have been 'not far from announcing the death of the tyrant' (Derrida 1982: 4), the death of Creon who presides over the play *Antigone* by Sophocles: she defied him, buried her brother, and was punished by the tyrant, entombed, alive—but she hanged herself to cheat the slow death he had hoped to inflict. Hegel describes her as 'the everlasting irony … of the community' (Hegel 1977: 288), but it is Judith Butler who best explains what she symbolises: Antigone articulates 'a pre-political opposition to politics' (Butler 2000: 2), showing 'kinship as the sphere that conditions the possibility of politics without ever entering into it' (Butler 2000: 2), occupying a logically—geographically and discursively—impossible space 'outside the terms of the polis' (Butler 2000: 4). But this is 'an outside without which the polis could not be' (Butler 2000: 4); her exile from Thebes makes possible the polis from which she is exiled. 'There has to be some "other"' (Cixous and Clément 1986: 71), assert Cixous and Clément. There has to be some Other for the polis to be; there has to be some Other for philosophy to be.

—I am not suggesting, of course, that either Cixous or Derrida are engaged in writing this Other, but that they are writing something between the two opposed terms; like Antigone, they are at once 'inside' and 'outside,' exiled from the institution and essential to its policing of its borders, producing texts which 'avoid frontal and symmetrical protest, opposition in all the forms of anti-' (Derrida 1982: xv) and which are neither acceptable nor not-acceptable to the critical institution: it cannot abide—does not know what to do with—such interstitial texts.

—So the limit is always already transgressed, at once a limit and a passage: 'Limit/passage' (Derrida 1982: xi). It is porous, permeable. The separatrix, the slash, /, represents on the one hand a holding apart, but on the other a drawing together. As Jeffrey Kipnis notes, it only really serves to establish 'the inseparability of those terms that it separates' (Kipnis 1991: 32). What most interests us here though, is not the inseparable terms, but what takes place in the elusive space between them.

—Molly Bloom begins her story in the bedroom at 7 Eccles Street, in the Calypso episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Leopold Bloom creeps up the staircase, pauses at the bedroom door, peers in, and asks if she want anything for breakfast. She mutters a soft, non-descript 'Mn' (Joyce 1922: 54). He exits again as she utters these two very middle letters of the alphabet, always already stranded between the beginning *a* and the ending *z*, rejecting the raging relentless linearity of his phallogocentric discourse, rejecting a tired tradition stretching back to the Homer's *Odyssey* and Aristotle's *Poetics*, with just two letters—not even a whole, discernible, sensible, readable, interpretable word. This is a case, perhaps, of the 'limits beginning to dissolve in the perversion of signifiers' (Cixous 1984: 18), and of language as an agent of transgression, subversion, even liberation.

—Like Cixous and Derrida, Molly's discursive and linguistic transgressions are tied to her geographic placement. Her thoughts endlessly return to place, endlessly returning home, to Gibraltar. 'The vocal muse' and 'Dublin's prime favourite' (Joyce 1922: 130), she is simultaneously at home and not-at-home in Ireland, local and foreign, inside and outside. Like Antigone (and both Cixous and Derrida), she is a border-crosser, a transgressor: as she lays in bed again in the Penelope episode, her thoughts cross between these places, and she is doubled as an outsider in Dublin and an insider in 7 Eccles Street, and as a physical exile from Gibraltar yet intimately at home there in her memories, recalling her childhood and her first loves. She is also doubled in her language, speaking from within the phallogocentric discourse but refusing to use its repressive tongue, instead releasing her own manic, flowing, river-running *écriture féminine*, with its broken grammatical and linguistic conventions, sentences, and taboos, as an antidote to the relentless logical march of the first seventeen episodes of *Ulysses*. Geography becomes a symbol of her linguistic exile: neither Irish nor Gibraltarian, refusing to be positioned—chained—either inside nor outside of their discourse, she threatens all they stand for, all that stands. Limits dissolve.

—She—Cixous, Antigone, and Molly—is responsible for nullifying the border 'between the public and the private, the visible and the hidden, the fictional and the real, the interpretable and the unreadable of an absolute reserve, like the collision of all genres' (Derrida 2006: 12). She is responsible too for a collision between art and theory as she blasts 'beyond literature' (Derrida 2006: 12), beyond the law of literature.

—Writing from within the laws and borders of a phallogocentric language, Cixous and Clément are prompted to write against the law, to write towards political and linguistic rebellion: 'I come, biographically, from a rebellion, from a violent and anguished direct refusal to accept what is happening on the stage on whose edge I find I am placed (Cixous and Clément 1986: 70). Such a refusal is the impetus behind the subversive desire of *écriture féminine* and its radically excessive texts: 'I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs' (Cixous 1976: 876). This text is a vomiting, a

'disgorging,' an 'outpouring' (Cixous 1981: 54), which might be what Philippe Sollers is describing when he tries—inadequately, although it is not his fault—to explain the river-running words of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*:

> Apparently: words, sentences. Really: clashes of letters and sounds. Voices and *names*. Listen to the recording made by Joyce himself of a passage from *Finnegans Wake*—opera, madrigal, inflections, accents, intonations, shifting from tenor to alto, baritone to soprano, in the delicate, subtle, fluid, everchanging apparatus of sexual differentiation, spoken, sung, calling … There are interjections, moanings, flashes of surprise, exclamations, questions which stop short, celebrations, mockings, whisperings, children, adults, men, women, old, young, low, high, depressed, euphoric, wilful, active, passive, reflexive (Sollers 1978: 114-5).

This is a 'language of flow' (Joyce 1922: 253) writes Joyce, and it 'means something' (Joyce 1922: 253). It doesn't necessarily offer its meanings in a traditional logocentric sense, present and presented, but mentions and alludes to—although hesitates from asserting—a series of potential meanings and knowledges. Similarly, Molly Bloom's language—this sometimes manic stream of conjectural and profane articulations and disarticulations endlessly eschewing interpretive certitude, breaking with convention and shattering the institutional bulwark of logocentrism—challenges the ability of the critical institution to read and comprehend. It is a gesture which perhaps has its origins in the eponymous symbol of Molly's episode: the wife of an absent husband, gone to war, who waits twenty years for Odysseus' return, Penelope weaves and un-weaves and re-weaves the tapestry on her loom, an interminable ambiviolent action of writing and erasure, a cunning weaver defying interpretation and the institution by refusing to produce a certain, stable, readable text.

—The institution 'overflows and cracks' (Derrida 1982: xxiv), unable to contain or delimit its Other. From these vital cracks, the genres of literature and philosophy flow and blur into one another, the limits and margins always already transgressed—deconstructed—by a series of symbolic border-crossings, both geographic and discursive. The borderline between art and theory is problematized, the separatrix twisted, and in this violent and ambiviolent action Cixous and Derrida produce their texts. Ultimately, these transgressions are manifested as the desire to write otherwise:

> To write otherwise. To delimit the space of a closure no longer analogous to what philosophy can represent for itself under this name, according to a straight or circular line enclosing a homogeneous space. To determine, entirely against any philosopheme, the intransigence that prevents it from calculating its margin, by means of a *limitrophic* violence imprinted according to new *types*. To eat the margin in luxating the tympanum, the relationship to itself of the double membrane. So that philosophy can no longer reassure itself that it has always maintained its tympanum (Derrida 1982: xxv).

This writing that is otherwise is produced in the puncturing of the tympanum, taking place not between philosophy and its Other, nor between literature and its Other, but in an interstitial space between genres. It is otherwise than both of these, neither art nor theory but an exemplary hybrid challenging the critical institution to accept it, knowing that it cannot, but continuing to express this perverse and subversive desire, continuing to produce these '"critical" inventions' (Derrida 1992: 52) which prove simply that, just as art cannot efface the labour of theory, nor can theory efface the labour of art.

—In the wake of Cixous and Derrida, Proust would not know how to read.

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