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Hélène Cixous's *The Exile of James Joyce*: A Biographical Limit Case

Abstract: This article examines Hélène Cixous's biographical monograph *The Exile of James Joyce* as a limit case of biographical praxis. Joyce's biography is read in the context of Cixous's own evolving personal motif of exile, revealing her autobiographical investment in becoming a writer through reading Joyce. She pushes the boundaries of the biographical genre at the intersections of autobiography, literary criticism, and biography, defying simple generic classifications and exposing the limits of conventional demarcations between the artist, the work, the biographer, and the critic. As a result, the text becomes a creative-interpretive hybrid project, where the biographical code has been displaced by focus on epistemological, psychological, and textual problems implicit in the relationship between the biographer and the biographical subject. Her approach invites us to consider the following questions: How does she rewrite Joyce through her own multiple experiences of exile that she also shares with Jacques Derrida? What difference does gender make in the construction of the biographical subject as the great modernist "genius"? How does gender marginalization impact her authority as a biographer? The discussion is also framed through some larger questions concerning the aesthetic, epistemological, ethical, and political role of biography in approaching modernist literature and culture: Is biography an art or a craft? What kind of knowledge does biography generate? How far is biography a form of discursive violence and voyeurism? How can attention to affect and intimacy offer new insights into the aesthetics of the biographical genre?

Keywords: biography, genre, hybridity, Hélène Cixous, James Joyce, Jacques Derrida

Hélène Cixous's monumental (almost 800-page long) monograph *The Exile of James Joyce* was originally published in French as her doctoral dissertation in 1969 and was subsequently translated into English by Sally Purcell in 1972. In positing this text as a biographical limit case, I am interested in Cixous's use of the biographical method, which in her hands becomes a form of "autobiopoiesis,"¹

¹ In her book on Joyce, Cixous refers to his "biopoetic" practice (*Exile* 567) where, to paraphrase Verena Conley, life and text engender each other (Conley, 10). My term is an extension of Cixous's use of biopoiesis.

actually helping her deal with her own evolving autobiographical theme of exile. As the thematic emphasis on exile engulfs the biographical subject, Cixous's text gradually enacts the process of becoming-other, becoming a writer through reading Joyce. She pushes the boundaries of the biographical genre at the intersections of autobiography, literary criticism, fiction, and biography, defying simple generic classification and exposing the limits of conventional demarcations between the artist, the work, the biographer, and the critic. As a result, the text becomes a creative-interpretive hybrid project, where the biographical code has been displaced by focus on epistemological, psychological, and textual problems implicit in the relationship between the biographer and the biographical subject. Her approach invites us to consider the following questions: How does she rewrite Joyce through her own multiple experiences of exile and marginalization? What difference does gender make in the construction of the biographical subject as the great modernist "genius"? How does her linguistic and gender supplementarity impact her authority as a biographer? My discussion will be framed within some larger questions about the aesthetic, epistemological, ethical, and political role of biography in approaching modernist literature and culture: Is biography an art or a craft? What kind of knowledge does biography generate? To what degree is biography a form of discursive violence and voyeurism? How does biography reproduce dominant power relations in society, most importantly, gender politics? And, finally, how can the genre of biography be reconceived through attention to theories of affect and intimacy?

Exile, rooted in Cixous's personal history of displacement from French Algeria, works as a founding metaphor in her reflection on writing, her own and that produced by other authors important to her. Growing up in Algeria, where she was exposed to ubiquitous abuses of power in the form of colonial racism, imperialism, and — through her Jewishness — anti-Semitism, leads to Cixous's self-positioning on the side of otherness, allying herself with "History's condemned, exiled, colonized, and burned" (*The Newly* 72). As a result, she has been "cured" of any compensatory sense of belonging to fictional entities such as countries or nations; as she confesses, she "can never say the word '*patrie*', 'fatherland', even if it is provided with an 'anti-' (ibid. 72). As a potent sign, exile activates a whole series of semantic associations with homelessness, separation, loss, foreignness, dispossession, death, bereavement, and mourning. These thematic threads run across Cixous's ongoing questioning of writing, its roots and its conditions of possibility, constituting a spiraling motif that repeatedly gets theorized, politicized, personalized, and universalized in her journey through writing. Cixous often starts her essays by bringing desire to the scene of writing: "I want to work on texts," "I want to read," "I want to plant some paths." It seems that this reiterative desire stems from her "want" or lack, and inasmuch as lack and absence are also recognized as part of exilic experience, one can say that her writing is coming from the space of exile. "We are strangers when we read a

book, in every way; we are strangers too when we write a book, in every way,” she says in “Difficult Joys” (11).

In *The Exile of James Joyce*, Cixous uses exile as the originary point of “[Joyce’s] every movement” (4), as the generative locus and the controlling metaphor of his writing. Even though she does not rely on the explicitly psychoanalytic method, in her elaboration of this particular theme she proceeds in a way that parallels what Leon Grinberg and Rebeca Grinberg identify as a psychoanalytic perspective on exile and migration, in that she analyzes different types of object relations, or a series of Joyce’s “attachments” and “separations” that constitute his voluntary exile. According to Cixous, it is vital to his being able to function as an artist that he cultivate the feelings of separation and splitting, for in Joyce’s economy of lack, “one creates in order to retrieve or to recover what was lost” (*The Exile*, 511). She alleges that in his aesthetic practice writing is a form of “compensation and replacement for one who is absent” (*The Exile*, 497), whether it is the family, Dublin, Ireland, or the Church. The choice of exile is a sign of Joyce’s non-conformity (mirroring Stephen Dedalus’s *non serviam*) and, ironically, also of his sacrifice, since the “removal” of the *pharmakos* or scapegoat “brings about a consolidation of Ireland” through the artist’s imagination (*The Exile*, 453). At the same time, exile represents a transition from the local to the universal, from “the unhappy Dublin consciousness to a universal consciousness” (437). Paradoxically, the objects he repudiates are indispensable to him, and he never leaves them or, as Cixous puts it, “they do not leave him” (475). In her reading, prohibition and the law are crucial to understanding Joyce’s masochistic relationship to writing, where pain is necessary to the artist’s spiritual growth. She links the theme of exile with that of betrayal, transgression, and sin, making it look “more complex than the simple exile of the Artist who is driven out of society for not being like others” (*The Exile*, 502).

If exile or liminality is for both Joyce and Cixous the necessary precondition to the very possibility of writing, it also impacts the writer’s positioning vis-à-vis genre. Situating Cixous’s monograph in relation to the “new biography” — a recurring term used by Boswell in his *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1779–1781) and picked up in its modern version by Lytton Strachey in *Eminent Victorians* (1918) — reveals several points of overlap and departure from this tradition. The new biography “signals many kinds of practices that exploit the boundaries drawn between” biography, fiction, autobiography, and literary criticism (Smith and Watson 9). In Strachey’s use, the new biography moves away from Victorian hero worship and hagiographic approaches, marking a turning point in the development of the genre by placing new demands of artistic competence on the biographer who is henceforth more of an artist than a historian. Biography must include speculation about the subject’s inner life, must reveal unconscious motives, and must also expose less complimentary personality traits. Commenting on the new biography in her 1927 essay by the same title, Virginia Woolf describes the central problem of biography as being poised between the “granite-like solidity” of “truth” and the “rainbow-like

intangibility” of “personality” (“The New Biography”, 149). She argues that “facts must be manipulated” in order to convert the dull, objective, biographical research into a captivating reading of the biographical subject’s personality (ibid. 150). Here she also registers the changed role of the biographer from a chronicler to an artist who “chooses” and “synthesizes” (ibid. 152). Subsequently, in her later 1939 essay, “The Art of Biography,” revisiting the debate on biography as “something betwixt and between” a craft and an art, a debate that pivots around the question of whether the biographer must restrain his or her imagination and focus on evidence, or whether he or she can interpret more freely, Woolf gives a free rein to the biographer to produce “the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders” (126). This type of a revised biographical contract between the biographer and his or her subject is exemplified by the psychobiography practiced by Richard Ellmann’s *James Joyce* (1959), which employs psychology and psychoanalysis to explore how the unconscious and myth shape the biographical subject’s behaviour and organize his everyday life. Similar to Ellmann, Cixous uses psychology as crucial to her endeavours, and in this she emulates Joyce’s own method in *Ulysses*, applying the stream of consciousness and densely woven allusions to examine the characters’ deep motivations. In Cixous’s case it is sometimes difficult to make a distinction between fiction and essay, creative and critical writing, perhaps because for her both have a strong autobiographical investment. She traverses genders and genres, creating her own form of simultaneous reading and writing of self and others, in which acts of biopoiesis and autobiopoiesis become indistinguishable.

By unleashing biography’s creative licence and allowing the biographer to partake of the skills of a literary critic, a historian, a fiction writer, and an autobiographical narrator, the new biography has provoked serious epistemological questions concerning knowledge production and truth in biography. Later on, postmodernist and poststructuralist critiques of language, subjectivity, and representation have further exasperated any notion of objective biographical truth, which Virginia Woolf had already tested before by demanding that verifiable facts be enlivened by the biographer’s art. Biography is viewed as one more constructed narrative, an arbitrary imposition of coherence on the flux of life. While reading the pattern of exile into Joyce’s life and work, Cixous follows him in asserting an inextricable link between subjectivity and aesthetics or, in modernist terms, life and art, insisting that biographical information sheds light on his texts (*The Exile*, 92). According to her, “The work is a product, not only of the artist’s imagination, but also of his personal problems... in the same way [as] to Joyce life and art are substantial” (ibid. xii). She justifies her recourse to biographical facts in explicating fictional characters by referring to Joyce’s own pleasure in creating characters with characteristics borrowed from real people: “he recognized no frontier between his art and his life, not separating his writing, which was alone and always with him, from his external conversations and contacts with others... while one is tempted to seek always for Ulysses behind Bloom, one misses Joyce, ironic and angry, moving

back and forth between Bloom and Ulysses" (*The Exile*, 260).² Such philosophy results in Cixous's systematic compressing of analogies, collapsing ontological differences between literary, biographical, historical, and mythical figures. Consequently, for her, the truth revealed in biography, much the same as the truth of fiction, can only be an intersubjective, autobiographical truth that harnesses referentiality to the biographer's idiosyncratic storytelling needs. In a more radical formulation she articulates later: "All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another story" (*Rootprints*, 178).

Cixous's aesthetic fondness for blurring hypothetical, imaginary, and experiential ontologies correlates with the biographical form that constantly displaces generic boundaries and exceeds "the laws of genre." Her hybrid portrait of Joyce blends autobiographical, speculative, literary critical, and biographical strategies, mixing stylistic conventions of both academic writing and fiction. The text juxtaposes passages dramatizing his inner thought processes with tedious exercises in *explication de texte*. Regarding the latter, Cixous's critic Susan Sellers explains that in practicing *explication de text*:

We work very close to the text, as close to the body of the text as possible; we work phonically, listening to the text, as well as graphically and typographically... We listen to a text with numerous ears. We hear each other talking with foreign accents and we listen to the foreign accents in the text. Every text has its foreign accents, its strangenesses, and these act like signals, attracting our attention. These strangenesses are our cue. We aren't looking for the author as much as what made the author take the particular path they took, write what they wrote. We're looking for the secret of creation, the same process of creation each one of us is constantly involved with in the process of our lives. Texts are the witnesses of our proceeding. The text opens a path which is already ours and yet not altogether ours. (146)

Through such intimate enmeshment with the text's otherness, Cixous incorporates aspects of her own identity formation as a writer, demonstrating her deep personal investment in constructing the biographical narrative of Joyce's creative trajectory that is usable to her. Everywhere in Cixous's prolific writing there are echoes of Joyce's influence. He is one of those dead artists to whose school she had dutifully gone for apprenticeship, like him, staging the scene of writing as the scene of transgression, privileging epiphany over realism, and linking separation with creativity by recognizing the need to leave "home" and to transform one's exile into a country (*Three Steps*, 120). There are Joycean themes in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, published more than twenty years after her doctoral monograph. She also shares with him identification of the poet with women and birds as marked by "otherness" (reminiscent of Joyce's references to the Egyptian god of writing Thoth, the son of the sun-bird god Amon) and the importance

² There is ample evidence of such fluidity and fluttering between fiction and reality in her earlier readings of Joyce's intimate letters to Nora, where Cixous plays couple swinging with Joyce-Nora and Bloom-Molly, resulting in the hybrid recombination of Bloom-Nora and Joyce-Molly, expressive of their real and fictional libidinal economies. ("Portrait de sa femme" 44-45)

of inscription of the author's proper name. For example, Cixous's inscription of her name in *Three Steps* combines both the Joycean and Derridean influences. Her signature is scattered throughout: "I" and the doubled "I" in the initial of her name ("H"). The "H" returns in the form of puns on "axe," "ash," or "attached," constituting moments of Cixous's self-recognition, when she literally finds "herself" ("H," "axe," "hache") in "her" favourite writers/dreamers such as Tsvetayeva or Kafka.³ Through her readings, Cixous becomes plural. Her "I" inscriptions seem to be indebted to the plural voice of Stephen Dedalus, whose "I. I and I. I" represents "the ontological Protean existence" that moves in the space of creative imagination (*The Exile*, 592). In a sense then, like Joyce's *Portrait*, Cixous's *Three Steps* is her self-portrait, whose very title encodes her multiple presences in the text: in "H: you see the stylized outline of a ladder" (*Three Steps*, 4).

However, it is necessary to draw a cautionary line between Cixous's tendency to overidentify with her subject(s) and the danger of violating the ethical codes of biographical praxis, especially those concerning the issue of intrusiveness and the use of the author's intimate archives that is permitted to the biographer. While working on her dissertation, in 1963 Cixous went to the United States to research Joyce's manuscripts held in Buffalo, Yale, and Cornell. She was known under her married name, H el ene Berger, when she published her material in *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, the publication which implicated her in the ethical breach of privacy. Brenda Maddox, the biographer of Joyce's wife Nora Barnacle, has exposed Cixous's infamous use of Joyce's so-called "dirty" letters from 1909. These letters had been sold by the widow of Stanislaus Joyce after his death in 1955, and have been at the centre of controversy involving the efforts of Joyce's trustees and family to minimize their notoriety. According to Maddox, "Intellectual biographies of the 1950s were not expected to concern themselves with their subjects' sexual lives" (519). Ellmann, who was reluctant to impose such self-censorship, was forced to omit the letters in the first edition of his biography of Joyce (1959), and even in the new 1982 edition he "chose once again to shy away from the dirty letters," offering very limited quotations (Maddox, 520). Finally, in 1975, in *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, he published the 1909 correspondence "in full, without a single ellipsis. Every foul word was there" (Maddox, 520). Apparently, the Joyce trustees "had finally consented to publication in order to stop the letters' being pirated and quoted (and misquoted) widely. They had been read by many people. A French scholar, H el ene Berger (also known as Cixous), had copied them in longhand and published them in France" (Maddox, 520–521). Cixous's illegitimate copying of the letters seems especially dubious, given the fact that Joyce's grandson, Stephen Joyce, was passionately engaged in fighting the invasion of his grandfather's privacy. He wrote to the *International Herald Tribune*, publically condemning "the

³ In *Three Steps* Cixous recalls Tsvetayeva's dream of the axe and the peasant (91), as well as Kafka's definition of a book as "the axe for the frozen sea inside us" (*Three Steps*, 17).

French journalist-author who pirated [the 1909 letters] from the Cornell University Library and the French periodical which first published them” (Maddox, 523).

The problem of biographical overidentification and the potential blind spots it may lead to acquires a different kind of urgency in Cixous's construction of gender politics that animates her interpretation of Joyce's life. Like any other genre, biography is informed by the ideological discourses of its time and participates in producing social, cultural, and political meanings, subjects, and values. Recognizing gender and class biases that determine whose stories will be told and whose excluded, Virginia Woolf critiques the male-dominated tradition of biography in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), where she documents the absences and marginality of women in Western biography. In this context Cixous's treatment of Nora is particularly revealing in its reproduction of critical clichés about Joyce's wife as a simple, uncultivated woman of “hazy sensual mentality” (*The Exile*, 505). There is a complete erasure of Nora's subjectivity, with her becoming “an object of worship, the incarnation of powers and forces that both attracted and repelled him” (505). Although Cixous marvels at “the extraordinary complicity of this couple” (510), she reduces Nora to the physical and claims that Nora did not understand the implications of the erotic games that Joyce drew her into through his 1909 letters. Cixous falsely states that Nora “never read anything he wrote” (510). “With no education, ideas, or pretensions, she could be mentally moulded to suit the liking of the man who dominated her. Her presence did not disturb his solitude” (505). This symbolic sacrifice of Nora constitutes the performative act of discursive violence on the part of Cixous, who sets up the scene of biography as the scene of crime (not least being the violence of writing which takes away from the living, reducing women like Nora Barnacle into the position of gendered otherness). Nora must be used as a scapegoat, so that Cixous's romanticized vision of Joyce as a solitary, exiled genius can work. Nora's agency must be repressed because it is incompatible with the biographer's image of Joyce as the artist who “stands alone at the centre of his work” (*The Exile*, 510). At once marginalizing and universalizing women figures in Joyce's life and work, her textual analyses are steeped in stereotypes of femininity representing the female as a threat to the male: a seductress trying to capture him; hostile to the male—aligned with religion; mother Ireland as a sow devouring her children; womanhood representing “spiritual darkness,” associated with the flesh, with the ideas of sin and beauty, dangerous pleasure and aesthetic delight (*The Exile*, 368). What is missing from Cixous's discussion is a critique of religious misogyny at the root of such imaginaries based on the “polarization of attraction and repulsion” (*The Exile*, 404) and her foregoing of any analysis of the possibility of Joyce's becoming-woman. Although it can be attributed to the sources she relies on, most notably Ellmann's biography with its masculinist bias, Cixous's insensitive handling of the problem of femininity in Joyce might seem shocking from today's perspective, especially in the light of her later transition towards more feminist-inspired modes of literary criticism and creative writing.

Reflecting on the evolution of Cixous's writing in the years immediately following the publication of *The Exile*, we can see that she moves away from the masculine mode of criticism and closer toward what she calls "études féminines" — a theory of reading and writing elaborated in "Sorties," as part of *La Jeune Née* (1977; trans. *The Newly Born Woman*), "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975), or "La venue à l'écriture" (1977; trans. "Coming to Writing"). A feminine mode of research, for her, is a radical alternative to "the appropriation and destruction of [sexual] difference necessitated by phallic law" (Sellers, 7). She is guided in her approach to the text by "respect for the other" (notwithstanding the fact that earlier, in *The Exile*, while Joyce is her "other," Nora is turned into a scapegoat). If in her early interpretation of Joyce there are already most of the seeds of her philosophy of exile as an enabling condition of writing, when she returns to Joyce in her later texts, it is with more ambivalent feelings. Interestingly, this ambivalence extends also onto her own dissertation from which she distances herself in "Coming to Writing" by calling it mockingly "a pissertation" (54). This is how she comments on the type of criticism she practised in her biography of Joyce: "if you want to write books, you equip yourself, you trim, you filter, you go back over yourself, severe test, you tread on your own flesh, you no longer fly, you no longer flow, you survey, you garden, you dig, ah, you clean and assemble, this is the hour of man" ("Coming to Writing", 54). Joyce reappears in her reflection on the relationship between writing and the law as a negative example of the masculine economy that validates a prohibition by internalizing it rather than, like her idolized Clarice Lispector, refusing to respect those laws "imposed on us by institutions, religion, morals" (*Readings*, 26). Joyce's attitude to exile is informed by his "negative theology" (Conley, 23). Cixous critiques him for putting in place "an enormous system of transgression" (*Readings*, 7) which is a wellspring of his desire to write. All this is not to say that Joyce ceases to be a profound influence in Cixous's own writing. Between *The Exile of James Joyce* and her later works such as *Three Steps*, we can trace a trajectory from the modernist preoccupation with the relationship between art and life to the postmodern questioning of writing, subjectivity, language, alterity, and history. Noticeably, Cixous increasingly tends to redefine the political in terms of an ethical enterprise, as she gradually evolves from a feminist-informed platform towards a universalized ethic of writing/reading based on the movement from self to other and relinquishment of mastery.

Cixous has shared Joyce from the very beginning of her career with Jacques Derrida, whom she first met in 1962 — sources report that "they talk about Joyce" (*Rootprints*, 210) — and to whom she gradually transferred her affiliative identification. Their lifelong friendship is documented in multiple mutual tributes, including her volume called *Insister of Jacques Derrida*, the title which situates her as Derrida's "sister," and his *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius*, a lecture given at the inauguration of the Cixous archive at the Bibliothèque Nationale de

France in 2003, shortly before his death.⁴ He calls her “a foremost interpreter of Joyce” (25). Significantly, the way Derrida describes Cixous’s impact on the French language is similar to how Joyce’s impact on English might be described. According to him, she serves “a genius of the French language... in a manner both responsible and conscious of its inheritance, and nonetheless violent, unpredictable, irruptive, heteronomous, transgressive, cutting” (22). Commenting on Cixous’s oeuvre (at the time of his writing, more than 55 books published plus thousands of pages of unpublished materials such as letters, dream notebooks, and other documents), Derrida compares her to Homer, Shakespeare, and Joyce in that their work and hers contains “the potentially infinite memory...[condensed] according to the processes of undecidable writing for which as yet no complete formalisation exists” (14–15). Cixous, in turn, devotes a full-length study to Derrida in *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*. According to Frédéric Regard, the art of the biographical portrait that Cixous practices in this text opens up spaces from which a new voice for the biographical “I” can emerge (208). It is instructive to compare this method of allowing the “I” of her subject (Derrida) to materialize on the page through “the writing of life as grammatology,” that is the typology of script (Regard, 211), to her earlier biographical portraiture of Joyce, where “biography” is replaced by *explication de texte*, that is writing Joyce’s life as reading Joyce’s writing. In Cixous’s portrait of Joyce, rather than bringing out the “I” of her subject, the “I” of the biographer constantly inserts itself into writing.

To return to the question of biography as a genre, the evolving form of Cixous’s hybrid biography, with its double legacy of the new biography and postmodern literary criticism, calls attention to issues related to the ethics and politics of biographical representation. After all, the task of biography has always been to integrate an understanding of the past with the needs of the present, constructing the biographical subject in response to the political and affective needs of a particular historical moment of biography. It is interesting to note to what extent the original roots of biography as an ideological account of the lives of “great” white men continue to affect/infect the model of biography that Cixous has developed, from her early autobiographical identification with Joyce to her enmeshment and bond with Derrida. Blending the personal and the academic, her biographical portraits can be seen as making emotional spaces of affection for their subjects and opening up the possibility of identification for the biographer and the reader. Redefined in terms of affect, biography can be viewed as a cultural genre that responds to our need for intimacy, a site where intimate lives cross into the public sphere and are infused with social meanings. Predicated upon this desire for public intimacy, biographical representations participate in manufacturing powerful affects, inviting identification with the biographical subject and instilling in their audiences a wide range

⁴ The other book-length study Derrida dedicated to Cixous is *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...* (2000). They have also published a volume of their interwoven writing (*Veils*, 1998).

of *feelings*, from voyeuristic pleasure to nostalgia for a coherent and meaningful life and the permanence of the “hero” to metaphysical dread of mortality. Jacques Rancière’s comments on biography capture its affective dimension connected to the production of public feelings within the social realm. According to him, biography belongs to “the repetitive tense of an institution... It is a microcosm, in which the story of a singular event occurring to an individual coincides with the manifestation of the bonds of a society and the ways these bonds are lived as the embodied beliefs and feelings experienced by that society” (170). In raising biographical publics, where the subjectivity of personal emotions intersects with the sociality of affects, Cixous’s text can be seen as transitioning towards “postbiography,” a hybrid, self-reflexive successor of the new biography, where the very materialization of biographical form and the biographer’s subjectivity decentre the coherence of the biographical subject.

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