

‘CE QUI EST COUPÉ REPOUSSE’: JEAN GENET, HÉLÈNE CIXOUS, THE WOUND, AND THE POETICS OF OMISSION

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Abstract

This article explores the thematic and structural significance of the figure of the wound to Jean Genet’s *Pompes funèbres* (1947) and Hélène Cixous’s *Souffles* (1975). With reference to the differences between editions of *Pompes funèbres* and through a detailed genetic study of the hitherto unexamined manuscripts of *Souffles* (Cixous’s direct response to Genet’s novel), the article demonstrates how (self-)censorship becomes constitutive of narrative as such — of its deconstruction and its reconfiguration. By revealing how the later drafts of Cixous’s book operate to conceal its poignant autobiographical origin, and playing with the author’s ambiguous assertion that ‘Ce qui est coupé repousse’, the article exposes omission as a productive textual strategy.

[. . .] on entre en littérature par lésion. Par la suite chaque œuvre vit de sa plaie originaire.

— Hélène Cixous, *Entretien de la blessure*¹

‘Il n’y a pas à la beauté d’autre origine que la blessure’, writes Jean Genet in an essay bearing all the weight of an artistic manifesto.² The singular marker of an artist’s necessary solitude and suffering, the *wound* is, for Genet, simultaneously the site of the most secret self and the injury by which it is opened to alterity. Fittingly, Genet’s prose writings of the mid- to late 1950s are typified by a deliberate deconstruction constituting a veritable aesthetics of injury: the wound is both the subject and the method of his sketches and essays on Rembrandt (1957 and 1958) and Giacometti (1958) and, most poignantly, of his open letters to a fatally tubercular Roman prostitute (entitled *Fragments* (1954)) and to Abdallah, his famous *funambule* (1958). Genet begins his performative *Fragments* with this disclaimer: ‘Les pages qui vont suivre ne sont pas extraites d’un poème: elles devraient y conduire.’³ And as his career progresses the author is increasingly given to the variety of fecund fragmentation perhaps epitomized by his *Ce qui est resté d’un Rembrandt déchiré en petits carrés bien réguliers et foutu aux chiottes* (1967): true to its title, *Ce qui est resté* consists of the remnants of what was once a book-length study on the painter, presented in two obliquely dialoguing columns — notoriously, the structural model for Derrida’s

¹ Hélène Cixous, *Entretien de la blessure: sur Jean Genet* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2011), ‘Prière d’insérer’ (no p.).

² Jean Genet, *L’Atelier d’Alberto Giacometti* (1958), in *Œuvres complètes* [hereafter OC], 6 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1952–91), V (1979), 39–73 (p. 51).

³ Jean Genet, *Fragments . . . et autres textes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 74.

mammoth study of Genet (and Hegel), *Glas* (1974).⁴ Taken together, these wilfully fragmentary writings outline an aesthetic philosophy for which injury is an apt central metaphor.

Here I shall examine two equally fragmentary works, both issuing from loss, from trauma, from the kind of wound Genet identifies in *Le Funambule* as ‘une sorte de cœur secret et douloureux’.⁵ Acts of profound mourning masquerading as literary erotica, Genet’s *Pompes funèbres* (1947) and Hélène Cixous’s direct response to it in her early ‘fiction’ *Souffles* (1975) are deeply concerned with an exploration of wounds both literal and metaphorical. Cixous’s early encounter with Genet’s novel is a significant one — one to which her thoughts have returned throughout her literary career in a kind of repetition compulsion. References to *Pompes funèbres* appear as early as a well-known footnote of her epoch-making *Le Rire de la Méduse* (1975) and as recently as her essay on Genet, *Entretien de la blessure* (2011), which takes up thoughts and phrases from *Souffles*, sometimes almost verbatim, without, however, bringing any clarity to the confusion of the earlier book: an indecipherable amalgam of erotic scenes so thoroughly experimental that a mere plot summary proves impossible.

Endeavouring to locate and to probe the hidden holes in these texts on the example of the holes in human bodies they depict, I hope to demonstrate how (self-) censorship becomes constitutive of narrative as such. Attention to the genetic evolution of each book (in both the metaphorically biological and the more concretely textual sense) permits us to determine how this literary approach comes to affect the very structure of the artwork, fragmenting the text in order to allow it to reform with even greater potential to make meaning. By revealing how the later drafts of Cixous’s book operate to conceal its poignant autobiographical origin, and playing with her ambiguous assertion that ‘Ce qui est coupé repousse’⁶ — what is cut off revolts or regrows — I intend, ultimately, to expose *omission* as a productive textual strategy.

Pompes funèbres

A pyrotechnically offensive work, unrivalled in its brutality, Genet’s *Pompes funèbres* is, nonetheless, at its core a moving act of mourning: a homage to the author’s lost love, Jean Decarnin, who died during the French Resistance. At the origin of the artwork, then, is a very literal wound: the bullet holes in the beloved’s corpse, his chest ‘trouée en trois endroits’.⁷ If, as many have argued, *Pompes funèbres* can be

⁴ Hélène Cixous also often turns to Rembrandt as an example of the central position of the wound to artwork, as an example of an artist who seeks in some way to injure his audience; see, for instance, ‘Bethsabée ou la Bible intérieure’, *FMR*, 43 (1993), 14–18; ‘Sans arrêt, non, État de dessination, non, plutôt: Le Décollage du bourreau’, in *Repentirs* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1991), pp. 55–64; and ‘Stigmata, or Job the Dog’, trans. by Eric Prenowitz, in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (1998), with Foreword by Jacques Derrida and new Preface by the author (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 149–58. (The first two essays, trans. by Catherine A. F. MacGillivray, are also included in *Stigmata: ‘Bathsheba or the Interior Bible’*, pp. 3–15; and ‘Without End, No, State of Drawingness, No, Rather: The Executioner’s Taking Off’, pp. 17–27.)

⁵ Jean Genet, *Le Funambule* (1958), in *OC*, v, 8–27 (p. 12, emphasis original).

⁶ Hélène Cixous, *Souffles* (Paris: Éditions des femmes, 1975), p. 15.

⁷ Jean Genet, *Pompes funèbres*, in *OC*, III (1955), 7–162 (p. 138).

understood as a descent into darkness, for which sodomy and analingus serve as alternating or simultaneous master conceits,⁸ then the moment at which Jean Genet first penetrates his double (in some ways a prefiguration of Jean D.'s imminent demise)⁹ would be *the* central passage of the text. It is paradoxical, then, that it is almost entirely elided from the definitive edition; all that remains in the *Œuvres complètes* text is the prelude to the act and the elliptical description that Genet offers. What is missing, quite tellingly, is the copious bleeding that results:

Ma main en cherchant ses cheveux pour les caresser frôla son visage et c'est la joue que je caressai. Pendant que je me tournais pour allumer, il dut faire le geste de repousser les draps (nous étions mouillés par la sueur) car à la lumière, je vis qui [*sic*] considérait, loin de lui, à bout de bras, ses bras, ses mains tendues dont les ongles et les extrémités étaient rouges. Son visage où la sueur perlait avait de longues marques de sang. Je regardai mes mains. Elles étaient tachées de sang.¹⁰

This passage is particularly significant as it makes of the anus another kind of orifice, a variety of open wound, transforming the sweat that Genet incessantly associates with the anus into the blood that characterizes injury, and confirming the decadent conflation of eros and thanatos — of sodomy and death — that governs Genet's novel:

— Qu'est-ce qu'il y a? On saigne?

Il tenait toujours ses mains en avant, semblant les chauffer à des roses, mais il inspectait posément les draps. Ma verge saignait. Je compris avant lui. Parce que j'y avais été trop dur, sans souci de ses plaintes j'avais écorché son cul, et ma queue, prise dans un cheveu ou un poil s'était coupée légèrement. Ainsi nous avons mêlé notre sang. (pp. 71–72)

More than sodomy itself, then, it is this bleeding that allows the two Jeans to melt together in this expurgated passage of *Pompes funèbres*. Moreover, the choice of the verb *écorcher* definitively transforms this injury into a linguistic phenomenon. When referring to a body, *écorcher* means to graze, but it can also mean to mispronounce a word or, in a more argotic register, to butcher a language — recalling a footnote from *Fragments* describing a strategy of violence *of* and *against* language: 'Avec mon froid ciseau, détachés du langage les mots, blocs nets, sont aussi des tombeaux. Ils retiennent prisonnière la confuse nostalgie d'une action que des hommes accomplirent et que les mots, alors sanglants, nommeraient.'¹¹ It is through this self-inflicted violence, according to Genet, that words make meaning.

Like *Ce qui est resté* but victim of a more conventional variety of censorship, *Pompes funèbres* is also a wounded text. As Gene Plunka points out, it was begun

⁸ As Camille Naish puts it in *A Genetic Approach to Structures in the Work of Jean Genet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978): 'the work seems conceived as a metaphor for sodomy, a slow penetration into blackness corresponding to the narrator's defloration of his friend [Jean D.]' (p. 115). Running parallel to this interest in sodomy is an admiration for the wound; as David Houston Jones notes in *The Body Object: Self and Text in Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000): '*Pompes Funèbres* [...] radically contests the "making" of the body a stable unit as it does the "making" of narrative sense' (p. 156).

⁹ Naish, for instance, contends that '[b]eyond the thematic equivalence of love and death, a somewhat gruesome metaphorical identification of anus and extinction is established' (*A Genetic Approach*, p. 126).

¹⁰ Jean Genet, *Pompes funèbres* ([n. p.]: Bikini, 1947; [Paris]: [Gallimard], 1948) p. 71. (Hereafter, page references for quotations from the 1948 edition will be given in parentheses in the text.)

¹¹ Genet, *Fragments*, p. 82.

late in 1943 as a different book entirely and only after Decarnin's death did it become the funeral rites; as such, *Pompes funèbres* constitutes a kind of scar denoting absence.¹² Moreover, the version of the novel widely read today itself carries a number of scars similar to the one just mentioned. Fifteen hundred uncut copies were published anonymously in 1947 and four hundred and seventy hardback copies in 1948, but it was only five years later that the novel — with *Querelle de Brest* (also 1947) — would be added to the Gallimard edition of Genet's *Œuvres complètes*, in a significantly abridged version.

There is some mystery surrounding these cuts, an enigma that remains almost wholly unmentioned. Plunka erroneously attributes the 1948 edition to Marc Barbezat (whose Éditions de L'Arbalète had previously published Genet's *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose*),¹³ but, as Barbezat himself regretfully acknowledges:

En 1945, un jour de l'été, par un beau soleil, il [Genet] apporta à Décines, Pompes Funèbres. Il en voulait, si j'ai bon souvenir, 500 000 F de l'époque (anciens francs). Je n'arrivais pas à trouver cette somme. J'étais triste et c'est la rage au cœur que j'ai renoncé à cette œuvre que j'aurais publiée sous mon nom, alors que Pompes Funèbres parut sous le manteau, en livre de luxe, à Bikini (Gallimard) et en livre ordinaire sans nom d'éditeur (Morihiem).¹⁴

Even before the text had been subjected to a single cut, *Pompes funèbres* was thus published as two distinct books, both anonymous: the large-format deluxe edition with scarlet font highlights (1948), and the inexpensive black and white paperback with an illustration by Cocteau on the title page (1947). If the one edition represents the work as high literature, the other markets it as smut. Yet at this point — save for the circumflex added to Genet's name in the ostentatious edition and more accurately absent from the other — the text of these two books is still identical. It would be altered only when Gallimard took official responsibility for the novel, adding it to Genet's *Œuvres complètes*.

Camille Naish, one of few scholars working on the book to acknowledge its apparent censorship history at all, summarizes the official position: 'Apparently appalled by Genet's treatment of the theme of treason, Gallimard has excised from the 1947 version a variety of passages amounting to at least thirty pages'.¹⁵ Similarly, common consensus has it that *Pompes funèbres* was censored for obscenity, as may well have been the publisher's original intent. But while this would appear to explain the excision of such passages as the central description of sodomy cited above, even a cursory glance at the two versions one beside the other seems to contradict this reductive account of the events: Gallimard's definitive version of the text is scarcely less scandalous or less obscene than the first, and the excised

¹² Gene A. Plunka, *The Rites of Passage of Jean Genet: The Art and Aesthetics of Risk-Taking* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1992), p. 59.

¹³ To my mind, the most extensive (and the only particularly persuasive) summary of the genesis and publication of *Pompes funèbres* is that in Edmund White's biography, *Genet* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 320–25.

¹⁴ Marc Barbezat, 'Comment je suis devenu l'éditeur de Jean Genet', afterword to Jean Genet, *Lettres à Olga et Marc Barbezat* (Paris: L'Arbalète, 1998), pp. 231–64 (pp. 246–47).

¹⁵ Naish, *A Genetic Approach*, p. 115. This is a conservative estimate; by my count, more than fifty full pages are cut from the original edition.

passages seem to be cut almost indiscriminately, at times as if with an errant jigsaw file. Certainly, there is no paucity of smut or politically provocative opinion in the final version, and, while some changes do indeed temper very slightly the treasonous aspect of the original, others seem either to be aimed at suppressing passages too intimate to their author to be published, or to have been made with the specific aim of rendering the work less readable.

In any event, as Naish argues: ‘In addition to peculiarities of content, *Pompes funèbres* is extremely hard to read, at least in the commercial edition of 1953. [...] The structure of the novel is such that these cuts constitute a severe menace to its continuity and comprehensibility.’¹⁶ At moments such as the one cited above, however, the 1947/1948 text appears almost to foreshadow future excisions. In the *Œuvres complètes* edition, for instance, Genet declines to quote Decarnin’s poetry, explaining that to ‘prononcer son nom dans la solitude est déjà mieux. Si j’essayais de redire à haute voix les mots qu’il prononçait, ses phrases, les poèmes maladroits qu’il écrivit, risqueraient de lui donner corps en mon corps’.¹⁷ Moments like these are much more interesting from a literary perspective in that they reveal such omission to be part of a strategy of suppression by which the deceased, once conjured, is simultaneously repressed. (The same process, notably, takes place with Jean Decarnin’s name throughout: present in the dedication, it is nevertheless elided in the text itself, reduced simply to Jean D.) However, Jean’s Jean must first be given form before being repressed; and, accordingly, in the original edition this passage follows directly after one such awkward page-length pseudo-prose-poem attributed to Decarnin and ostensibly written soon after he allowed himself to be sodomized. Also omitted, at the precise same moment, is the tender but discomfiting conclusion to this account of sodomy and its resultant bleeding. In the original edition the narrator will bring this wounding even further into *text*, writing both *on* his beloved’s body and *with* his blood:

— Tu as mal?

— Non c’est rien. Et toi?

Il haussa une épaule et sauta du lit jusqu’au lavabo. Quand il se recoucha il avait les mains glacées. Il me parla avec tant de calme qu’afin de ramener un peu d’émotion parmi nous, ou peut-être par cruauté, pour me venger de sa lucidité, je passai mon index entre ses fesses, le retirai sanglant et traçai en souriant, sur sa joue droite une faucille avec un marteau rudimentaire, et sur sa joue gauche une croix gammée. (p. 72)

It is a poignant, if playfully overdetermined, image traced in blood: the shorthand of the hammer and sickle beside the swastika.¹⁸ Thus repeating the caress with

¹⁶ Naish, *A Genetic Approach*, p. 115.

¹⁷ Genet, *Pompes funèbres*, in *OC*, 111, 41.

¹⁸ Patrice Bougon summarizes the (a)political implications of this passage as follows: ‘Les signes que trace le narrateur sur les joues du *communiste* Jean Decarnin produisent une relation d’équivalence symbolique entre deux régimes politiques ennemis. Cette relation, en 1947, est une provocation, mais elle suggère également une vérité historique dans la mesure où elle fait aussi référence au pacte germano-soviétique et au caractère totalitaire des régimes politiques de Hitler et de Staline. Quant à la couleur rouge du sang, elle surdétermine la relation à ces deux emblèmes nationaux: “l’étendard rouge à croix gammée”’; see P. Bougon, ‘Politique, ironie et mythe dans *Pompes funèbres*’, *Europe*, 74 (August–September 1996), 65–77 (p. 75, emphases original).

which the passage begins — the narrator had brushed Jean D.'s cheek while reaching for his hair — with this blood Genet inscribes the central conflict of the book on to his lover's body and both are denied coherence. But what appears a perfect (if unsubtle) distillation of the central historical conflict at the origin of the novel — the bloody clash between communism and fascism — into a single image will be censored soon after it is given form, with this entire passage excised from the Gallimard edition. The impetus of the entire novel is, in fact, omitted, attested only by an almost imperceptible textual scar.¹⁹

Souffles

'All literature', contends Hélène Cixous, 'is scarry. It celebrates the wound and repeats the lesion.'²⁰ The wound is an inscription that both adds and subtracts, reveals as it conceals; and Cixous's titles from *Sorties* (her portion of *La Jeune née*, 1975) to *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (1998) signal that her texts are meant to break away and exceed their frames like Genet's fragments — as if the lines of text might escape the page or the covers of the book. But if Genet's narratives are violently broken up post facto, Cixous's texts are, to an extent, born this way: insistently less interested in narrative (and it is for this reason, for instance, that her works are always labelled *fictions* and never *romans*), Cixous adapts Genet's afterthought of omission into a revolutionary poetics. It may be precisely for this reason that the radical experimentalism of Cixous's *Souffles* has, perhaps, not aged as well as Genet's *Pompes funèbres*. (Once a favourite among feminist critics, the book has since been all but forgotten.) Speaking of her process of composition in a series of interviews with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, the author describes her first writings as automatic and fragmentary:

je ne les ai pas écrits [...] ils sont arrivés et en outre, *en morceaux*. Ce sont *des fragments*, parce que je ne pensais pas que j'écrivais un livre. J'écrivais des choses, *ce que j'écrivais c'étaient des lambeaux mais des lambeaux de ma propre chair*.²¹

It seems, then, that a feminine writing from the body — as Cixous advocates at the beginning of her career — might also be a strategy that necessarily entails writing out of injury in order to allow such 'wounded' texts to come into being. If this were true, it would give an astonishing measure of continuity to an œuvre that in recent years has displayed an undeniable fixation with the figure of the wound.

To an even greater degree than *Pompes funèbres*, Cixous's *Souffles* is not one work but many. The definitive text printed by the feminist publisher Éditions des

¹⁹ This exhibition of an absence is in keeping with the thematic aim of Genet's texts. As Mairéad Hanrahan has insightfully put it in an essay on the wound in the author's works: 'L'écriture de Genet exhibe sans arrêt le vide. Ses textes tournent avec insistance autour d'une absence, s'acharnent à rendre visible, sensible, un manque justement au niveau du sensible. Montrer que toute forme — quelque noble ou divine qu'elle soit — renferme un trou, s'érige autour d'un trou; exhiber le trou dont, y compris littéralement, tout tout se compose: voilà ce à quoi les divers tours et truquages de l'écriture de Genet seront employés'; see M. Hanrahan, 'L'Exhibition du vide: la blessure indicible à l'origine de l'art', in *Jean Genet: rituels de l'exhibition*, ed. by Bernard Alazat and Marc Dambre (Dijon: Éditions universitaires de Dijon, 2009), pp. 99–113 (p. 113).

²⁰ Hélène Cixous, 'Preface: On Stigmatexts', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, in *Stigmata*, pp. x–xiii (p. x).

²¹ Hélène Cixous, with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, *Rencontre terrestre: Arcachon, Roosevelt Island, Paris Montsouris, Manbattan, Cuernavaca* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2005), p. 20 (my emphases).

femmes is an amalgam primarily of two interrelated but entirely distinct unpublished manuscripts, which are then further jumbled with the addition of an assortment of other fragments, drafts, and proofs. One explanation for this surfeit of loosely related drafts might be the difficulty in finding an appropriate publisher; in the final version, Cixous wonders: ‘*On aura commandé que Souffles soit coupé?*’²² In a 1975 interview with Christiane Makward the author announces that the work is forthcoming with Seuil under the title *Vol/e*,²³ but this version never appeared; the final, Éditions des femmes text (Cixous’s first collaboration with this publishing house) is most likely a much different work from the one intended for Seuil, compiled as it is from a certain number of previously unpublished (or only partially published) texts.

Cixous seems to have a memory block regarding *Souffles* in general — easily among her most understudied texts — and its publication history in particular. When asked about her drafts for the book, she told me that it had once been twice as long and referred me to her comments in her interviews with Jeannet.²⁴ But in these interviews she merely proclaims (seemingly entirely unprompted): ‘*P.-S. Souffles je ne m’en souviens pas du tout.*’²⁵ When pressed to elaborate she simply insists:

Souffles: aucun souvenir. Sauf global: je me souviens que c’est un livre de désir, de l’acharnement, de la faim, du cri — oui. Mais les pages, les organes, rien. Et comme tous ces livres sont chaque fois animés par des Souffles que la mort (une mort ou une autre) a coupés, je n’ai pas envie d’y retourner.²⁶

The significance of this oblique assertion (more revealing than it might appear at first glance) and the wilful amnesia it implies will be explored below. In the Jeannet interviews Cixous very rapidly glosses the publication history and her move to Éditions des femmes, but she declines to divulge fully her reasons for leaving Seuil.²⁷ In any event, an earlier version of a very small portion of the text was published in *La Nouvelle Critique* in 1975 under the title ‘La Noire Vole’. When I asked the author if she ever regretted the unpublished portions, she responded that she never thought of them again, having other things to write.²⁸ Both confirming and challenging this claim, the guiding principle of my analysis of *Souffles* will be the notion, expressed near the beginning of the work, that ‘Ce qui est coupé repousse’ (p. 15). Taking this ambivalent assertion as my point of departure, I shall focus on images of injury and (more pointedly) of amputation in the work in order to reveal omission as a productive textual strategy.

Near the conclusion of the Éditions des femmes text Cixous cites a Baudelairean textual strategy as an analogue, exclaiming that her work has neither

²² Cixous, *Souffles*, p. 198 (emphasis original). (Hereafter, page numbers for quotations from the Éditions des femmes publication will be given in parentheses in the text.)

²³ See Hélène Cixous, Interview with Christiane Makward, trans. by Beatrice Cameron and Ann Liddle, in *SubStance*, 5 (1976), 19–37 (p. 34).

²⁴ Personal discussion, 12 April 2011.

²⁵ Cixous and Jeannet, *Rencontre terrestre*, p. 58.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 63–64.

²⁸ Personal discussion, 5 March 2011.

head nor tail: ‘*Pas de tête! Pas de queue!*’ (p. 200, emphasis original). If, for Baudelaire, the architect of literary modernity, the appropriate response to this formlessness was the fragmentation of his volume of prose poems — ‘Hachez-la en nombreux fragments, et vous verrez que chacun peut exister à part’²⁹ — then Cixous, as always, will literalize this metaphor to the greatest possible extent: chopping up her previous drafts with a pair of scissors and stapling the fragments back together in seemingly haphazard order. The most recent extant manuscript, housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Richelieu),³⁰ is very close to the definitive text and can only be described as grotesque: a chimera of competing fonts and formats, mutilated photocopies on paper of various calipers and colours, annotated and revised by hand, renumbered and reordered and rearranged, with passages struck and added, overlapping, at some points stapled three or even four sheets thick. The *Éditions des femmes* text is then composed of these *épaves* (to continue the comparison with Baudelaire) that Cixous has recollected, magpie-like, in a kind of literary *bricolage*.

The originals of what was once called *Vol/e* or *Femme vole* — dreamlike, sometimes undeniably surrealist — are scarcely more linear than the final version of *Souffles*, and it would not be worthwhile to summarize them extensively here. I shall nevertheless trace, from one draft to the next, the evolution of a certain nexus of key themes and recurring motifs in order to reveal the implications of and motivations for Cixous’s deconstruction and reconstruction of her work — a textual practice resembling Genet’s fragments on Rembrandt. I shall do this by concentrating on questions of omission and (self-)censorship, the gesture by which Cixous increasingly conceals or encrypts the heartbreakingly intimate impetus for her writing as the work progresses. For just as Genet’s text was born of a wound (the bullet holes in Jean D.’s body), Cixous’s *Souffles* seems to have been similarly inspired by the loss of a loved one: the death of her infant son from health conditions relating to Down’s syndrome, a fuller account of which will not appear until nearly three decades later, in *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là* (2000). In an early manuscript for *Souffles* Cixous makes the comparison between her own experience and Genet’s loss of Decarnin manifest, imagining her predecessor in a maternal role vis-à-vis his lost love:

J’adore que Jean des *Pompes Funèbres* non seulement ne permette pas à son enfant homonyme de s’aller mourir seul mais que librement, avec une très puissante tendresse il l’adopte tel qu’il devient, jusqu’au bout l’accueillant, le gardant l’élevant mort, comme une mère épouse le sort de son enfant. (MS)³¹

If, in this passage of the published text, the reference to Genet is somewhat obscured, he nevertheless becomes a paternal mother — to borrow the expression that Cixous employs repeatedly — adopting his dead lover as one would a child.

²⁹ Charles Baudelaire, ‘À Arsène Houssaye’, preface to *Le Spleen de Paris*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1975–76), 1, 275–76 (p. 275).

³⁰ Hélène Cixous, ‘*Souffles*: manuscrit autographe et dactylographique’, 1972–75, in Paris, BnF, NAF 28080 (I. 12). (Quotations in the text from the manuscripts of *Souffles* will be indicated accordingly in parentheses.)

³¹ Cf. *Souffles*, p. 122.

The text then continues, rendering Genet *pregnant* with his lover's corpse: 'Jean lui reste, se transformant pour le suivre; et cependant que pour l'enfant bercer après sa mort son sein naturellement s'érige en cercueil' (MS).

Later, in this same draft, confronted with her double, who has also lost a child, Cixous qua narrator makes more explicit reference to the autobiographical inspiration of her work:

Ce n'était pas mon fils: quoiqu'également égaré, le sien était encore vivant (le mien avait disparu depuis longtemps), mais elle était sans aucun rapport avec lui, ou presque. Elle n'était pas mère, me confirma-t-elle. Sa mère à elle tenait lieu de mère à cet enfant qu'elle n'avait jamais songé à se donner. Elle ne le pensait jamais. Il aurait pu, il pouvait, n'avoir jamais été. (MS)

Yet, if this narrative is a familiar one to the reader of Cixous's *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* — perhaps one of her more widely known literary works — the link between the two books is, as far as I am aware, one that has never been acknowledged, and unsurprisingly so. This is, for the author, a fertile wound that is first alluded to and then obscured, becoming increasingly cryptic and concealed as the book is prepared for publication.

The difficulty of writing this loss had already been performed, but every bit as obliquely, in earlier texts like *Tombe* (1970) and *Neutre* (1972), where Cixous writes: 'J'ai déjà perdu mon fils, il est déjà revenu.'³² But in *Neutre* as well — if possible, an even more experimental and challenging piece of writing than *Souffles* — the narrative recounting of the loss of the author's child will be so thoroughly absorbed into the allegorical as to be entirely unrecognizable as autobiographical. References to the son (with all of his potential signifiers) are most often executed by an operation of explicit omission — again, revealing by the very gesture that conceals — ultimately leaving merely 'f . . .', twice 'f ' , or, on one occasion, the staged suppression of 'fils'.³³ In the same manner, all explicit references to the birth and death of her first son are removed entirely (or are sufficiently obscured to be uninterpretable) from the Éditions des femmes version of *Souffles*; and, by the same token, such is the systematic suppression or encryption of Jean Genet's *nom propre* (similar to Genet's own suppression of the name of Decarnin) that in the final text the name is only rarely present in its actual orthography.

Cixous herself thematizes this variety of omission. The mysterious power of names and naming is a recurring motif, and very early in the first manuscript she writes:

le nom résonne à l'intérieur [...] et je ne pourrais le répéter, il est entendu, mais gardé, comme arrêté entre ma gorge et ma mémoire [...] je suis privée du nom qui pourtant m'a sommée de vivre. Il me semble si proche, nouvellement *omis*, partie de moi, mais distinct, inséparable mais insaisissable [...] je me demandai *pourquoi cette omission*, s'il me fallait en tirer profit ou

³² Hélène Cixous, *Neutre* (1972; Paris: Éditions des femmes, 1998), p. 108. In a preface for a new edition of *Tombe*, Cixous identifies *Neutre* as 'le préfiguré de *Le Jour où je n'étais là*'; see Hélène Cixous, *Tombe* (1970; Paris: Seuil, 2008), p. 13 (emphases original).

³³ See, respectively, Cixous, *Neutre*, pp. 20, 33, 56, 60, 61, 64, 65, 70, 71, 72, 85, 87, 90, 93, 101, 116, 163; p. 59; p. 63.

inquiétude, et *quelle part exactement j'avais à l'omission*, ou si le nom n'était pas silencieusement demeuré dans mon âme. (MS, my emphases)

The search for an unspoken (perhaps unspeakable) name thus occupies a good portion of this initial text, setting its potential reader, also, to look for a name whose significance we do not understand: 'Pour des raisons d'une parfaite précision, le nom ne m'était qu'apparemment confisqué mais il demeurerait à sa place par présence, puissance, et insistance, et par *l'énergie qui découle du lieu de l'omission*' (MS, my emphasis). The 'lieu de l'omission' is seen to be the secret origin of the text in so far as it is the missing name 'qui pourtant m'a sommée de vivre', signalling the centrality of the notion of omission to the first version of what would eventually become a part of *Souffles*, long before any actual cuts were intended, let alone executed.

By the same act of 'précision' Cixous explains some of the reasons for this gradual suppression — itself embedded in the significance of the very name of Jean Genet: 'Je vais essayer d'expliquer avec précision cette expérience bouleversante: Pupille de l'Assistance Publique [...] Enfant abandonné, mais non sans nom: autre miracle! J'aurais un nom-sans-famille, un nom plus que propre, pur, absolu. Un nom coupé' (MS). Even in its very presence, Jean Genet's name is considered a *nom coupé* — not unlike Jean D.'s or the omitted name of Cixous's son, which even in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* is replaced with her father's. And it is through his status as an abandoned child (in *Entretien de la blessure* she describes him as 'amputé de mère et de père'³⁴) that Jean Genet comes to stand in as a surrogate, a *lieu-tenant* (Cixous's playful reference to Seblon in *Querelle de Brest*) for her own child,³⁵ whom she had already given up long ago to the care of her mother in Algeria:

De Jean Genêt j'admire qu'abandonné un tel nom lui soit revenue à la place de père et mère. Quel homme, s'il s'aime, ne voudrait pas répondre à l'appel de si vifs signifiants? Ce qu'un nom fait d'homme, comment l'évaluer? De son nom d'une certaine manière Jean Genêt [*sic*] est le rejeton. (MS)

Genet's surname, which signals his belonging to a family that *does not* exist, will make of him a *rejeton*, both in its primary sense of 'offspring' or 'progeny' and (by the term's own apparent etymological kinship with the verb *rejeter*) a rejected or abandoned child. In a certain manner, then, it is precisely the name Genet itself that calls for the variety of suppression to which it will ultimately be subjected in *Souffles*.

But if Cixous's loss of her son is eventually, and increasingly obliquely, encrypted entirely into the unsteady allegory of the imagined loss of Jean Genet (itself apparently written in disappearing ink), it is by the selfsame operation that the Cixousian text will be constructed. Cixous's intimate and idiosyncratic images

³⁴ Cixous, *Entretien de la blessure*, 'Prière d'insérer'.

³⁵ In an interview with Jeannet, Cixous refers to *Tombe* itself as a 'lieutenant' for a book not yet ready to be written, strengthening the link to *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*; see Hélène Cixous, with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, 'The Book That You Will Not Write: An Interview with Hélène Cixous', trans. by Thomas Dutoit, *New Literary History*, 37.1 (2006), 249–61 (p. 255).

are fundamentally interconnected, occurring not in isolation but in an exemplary illustration of Freudian (or, more acutely, Lacanian) condensation. To put it as plainly as possible: in the supersaturation of significations (what the author calls ‘Une hémorragie de Sens’³⁶) by which the artwork operates, Cixous makes an equation between three terms: the story of her son, the myth of Jean Genet, and the genesis of the text itself.

It is not, however, determinable which of these three valences allegorizes which — what is signifier and what is signified — which is to say that each allegorizes the others in an incessantly recursive gesture. To take an example from the Editions des femmes text, early on Cixous explains:

Lorsqu’il eut atteint une vingtaine de pages (ce gosse était un texte) il devint incontrôlable [. . .] en tant qu’auteur d’enfant [. . .] j’étais pris dans un mouvement d’ente [. . .] au corps taillé pour s’ajuster à l’entaille qui en moi depuis toujours s’était fendue pour lui. Alors par ce vaurien, cet enfant coupé, se fichant dans mon entaille, devenir mère. (pp. 33–34)

If designations such as ‘vaurien’ and ‘enfant coupé’ recall Genet, they also — as Cixous insists — refer to the text itself. Moreover, the reference to grafting (‘ente’) exposes a literary strategy dating back to *Neutre*. As Cixous hints in a footnote on ‘l’accident chromosomique’ and ‘les observations sur le mongolisme’,³⁷ the genetic defect of this now-fictionalized child becomes a key metaphor for the text’s own grotesque production of meaning, by which established ‘chromosomal’ pairs of signifiers and their signifieds will be exploded and then recouped.³⁸ In the context of *Neutre*, Verena Andermatt Conley, borrowing the metaphor of which Cixous herself is fond, refers to this as ‘a practice of *greffe* (grafting)’: ‘Parts are severed from the body which, no longer whole and identical to itself, [. . .] continually engenders itself.’³⁹ As such, continues Conley, ‘*Neutre* is a bloody text, *sanglant* and *sans gland*, without genealogy or tree but one in which each graft, each cut, leads to another graft.’⁴⁰

Thus the notion of the graft inevitably involves its opposite: an amputation. Accordingly, images of amputated limbs are ubiquitous in Cixous’s work, beginning with *Neutre*, throughout the various versions of *Souffles*, and up to the opening of *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là*, where a ‘moignon [. . .] mignon’ is taken for ‘un petit

³⁶ Cixous, *Neutre*, p. 58.

³⁷ Cixous, *Neutre*, p. 69 n. 9.

³⁸ Lorene Birden makes a similar observation in the Introduction to her translation of *Neutre*, reading genetics as the master metaphor that brings together the book’s two key concerns: ‘the creation and exposure of metaphors and the play of Hazard’; see Hélène Cixous, *Neuter*, trans. with an introduction by Lorene M. Birden (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2004), pp. 7–30 (p. 19). As Birden summarizes ‘the numerous births or nasciences (*naissances* or *nessances*) that occur throughout the narrative’: ‘None of these children are healthy [. . .] The first child mentioned is in particular the victim of an extreme chromosomal malfunction. Genetics [. . .] is used here as an exact comparison, a perfect natural metaphor for both language and narration. [. . .] Indeed, the instance of a deformed child’s birth in *Neuter* is an example both of genetics gone awry and of literature gone awry; the baby was intended to be introduced as a metaphor for a language structure that has been tampered with, that has the “chromosomes” of its signifiers and its phonemes altered’ (pp. 19–20). While possibly aware of the autobiographical origin of this metaphor, Birden is discreet enough to allow it to remain unmentioned, focusing instead on its ambivalent textual implications.

³⁹ Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, updated edn (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

abricot rosé [...] un fruit flétri' and the waste-paper basket is filled to brimming with '[d]es millions de photos de moignons'.⁴¹ As Cixous intimates in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, this is a kind of surgical operation that simultaneously diminishes and augments; elsewhere, Cixous expresses this as a binary between stigmata and the scar:

scar adds something: a visible or invisible fibrous tissue that really or allegorically replaces a loss of substance which is therefore not lost but added to, augmentation of memory by a small mnemonic growth. Unlike scar, *stigmata takes away*, removes substance, carves out a place for itself.⁴²

We can see the same dialectal relationship in the passage from *Souffles* quoted above: 'j'étais pris dans un mouvement d'ente [...] au corps taillé pour s'ajuster à l'entaille qui en moi depuis toujours s'était fendue pour lui'. The graft (here: 'ente') thus occasions an 'entaille': a *wound* provoking, as if simply by semantic proximity, further pruning: *la taille*.

In *Souffles* (a book that, with its various pages stacked up, was at one point easily twice as long as the version ultimately published), this pruning is referred to as a type of censorship; and while the word *censure* could refer to many things (and many things at once) — difficulties in publishing,⁴³ the institutions of good taste,⁴⁴ the variety of censorship that the conscious mind exerts against the logic of the dream,⁴⁵ and, perhaps most importantly, the censorship of the female body⁴⁶ — the effect it has on the text is understood as a wounding one:

un coup d'ongles me râpe le flanc [...] c'est la vieille Censure [...] la vieille flique ne me lâche pas, mais odieusement touche à cette peau duveteuse! [...] Je me tourne, fonds sur elle, — besoin d'arracher le bras qui a osé — en moi c'est lui, gonfle mes muscles de notre énergie on lui attrape le poignet et on le tord, jusqu'à le plier, le nouer sur lui-même. La vue du bras maintenant grotesque me fait bien rire, on sent à peine la plaie que la Censure a ouverte à la hanche et le long de la cuisse ensanglantée. On se taille, on tourne cette page. (p. 127)

⁴¹ Hélène Cixous, *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2000), pp. 14–15. Mairéad Hanrahan goes so far as to identify this as one of the keys to Cixous's entire œuvre; see M. Hanrahan, 'Of Three-Legged Writing: Cixous's *Le jour où je n'étais pas là*', *French Forum*, 28 (Spring 2003), 99–113 (p. 111).

⁴² Cixous, Preface, in *Stigmata*, pp. xi (emphases original)

⁴³ In an interview first published in 1976, the year following the publication of *Souffles*, Cixous asserts that 'there is, on the part of the classical editorial houses, a little operation of indirect censorship that consists of leaving manuscripts lying around for two, three, four years. And then suddenly, something unblocks itself. So people are amazed: once again two books by Hélène Cixous coming out at the same time'; see Hélène Cixous, with Jean-Louis de Lambures, 'When I do not write, it is as if I had died' (1976), trans. by Elizabeth Lindley, in *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text, and Politics*, ed. by Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 51–57 (p. 51).

⁴⁴ In a 1990 interview with *Hors cadre*, Cixous speaks of the effect of censorship and interdiction in her fiction: 'Je sens que je vibre et que parfois dans mon propre texte j'inscris une protestation contre l'interdit. [...] Toujours la même accusation: de l'hermétisme, de l'illisibilité, de l'incompréhensible, du difficile, enfin, ce "vocabulaire critique" retentit, depuis vingt-cinq ans, je l'entends tout le temps. Parfois même avec une connotation intimidée, non-hostile' ('L'auteur entre texte et théâtre', *Hors cadre* (Spring 1990), 34–65 (p. 37); translated as 'Appendix: A Later Interview with Hélène Cixous', in Conley, *Hélène Cixous* (pp. 163–78)).

⁴⁵ In her 1975 interview with Christiane Makward (see n. 23 above), Cixous speaks of the censorship that time can impose on the signifiers of a dream: 'but the more you take it on the level of the pre-conscious, the closer it still is to the period of production in the unconscious, the lighter the censorship is, that's certain. Censorship is a very clear-cut thing, it's like a bar: it comes down, like that, and then — bang! it falls!' (p. 31).

⁴⁶ Indeed, a resistance to this kind of censorship is the central aim of *Le Rire de la Méduse* (1975): 'À censurer le corps, on censure du même coup le souffle, la parole [...] Écris-toi: il faut que ton corps se fasse entendre'; see Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2010), p. 45 (my emphases).

Whatever this censorship might represent allegorically, it operates by means of a violence that in turn provokes a counter-violence, and doubly so: not only does the censored subject react by twisting the arm of 'la vieille flique' into a grotesque figure; (s)he also, on the same occasion, executes the type of pruning alluded to above: 'On se taille, on tourne cette page.' This *taille* is then performed by a conspicuous textual break — a blank amounting to three full lines of text. What the reader of *Souffles* cannot know is that this is indeed the site of an actual suppression. Yet again literalizing the allegorical, the author has omitted a single sentence, which had hitherto confessed: 'Se tailler est une expression qui à plus d'un titre allume une curiosité: je ne sais pourquoi, je me sentis toujours tenue de le prendre à la lettre' (MS). Accordingly, then, in the printed version of *Souffles* this self-pruning is executed to the letter, with this very sentence excised, giving way to a textual gap, a self-conscious lacuna, performing its content through its very absence.

After this performative break, the text resumes its considerations on the nature of self-pruning, connecting it to amputation and revealing the wounds it leaves to be productive and indeed desirable:

Qu'est-ce qu'on se taille? Quand il se taille laisse-t-il aux mains des poursuivants un morceau de lui-même? Il fallait, s'il s'était taillé à temps, qu'il ait laissé au moins une trace, une image, — cette queue de l'animal pris au piège et qu'il fallut couper? Se tailler pour se récupérer. (p. 127)

For this unidentified 'il' — the reference could plausibly be to Jean Genet, to his lost Jean, to Cixous's lost son — self-pruning appears to be a necessary endeavour, a manner of escape but also of recuperation, perhaps the very strategy by which what has been lost can be recovered. Nevertheless, Cixous expresses disgust for these severed portions of the (textual) body:

Ainsi vagabondé-je autour du mot. Moi aussi je me suis taillée tout à l'heure, je me suis laissée tomber, pâmée, pour ne pas voir la balafre que la dingue [la Censure] m'avait ouverte. J'avais tout plaqué — pouvais pas encaisser ce genre de bobo. Un trou de balle propre et petit, oui, mais cette plaie lippue et saignante, impossible. (p. 127)

Paradoxically, *la taille* appears to be a method of evading injury, or at least the sight of it. Thus Cixous wanders *around* the wound (full-lipped, as if prepared to speak) — avoiding it — just as she admits to wandering around the word *se tailler*. She goes on to explain that it is not the injury itself that she finds bothersome, but rather the remnant of what was:

Un moignon ne me gêne pas; mais la main séparée me fait horreur [. . .] C'est la chose morte qui me dégoûte; pas l'amputation, le morceau. Si l'on me coupait la jambe, j'aimerais mon genou. Je m'étais donc taillé[e], par peur de me voir remorquer un cadavre de jambe. (p. 127)

Again writing the wound while insistently rejecting the symbolic menace of castration, this passage reveals both the impetus for the type of suppression (once more coded as an amputation) described above, and the primary meaning of the key assertion, 'Ce qui est coupé repousse' (p. 15). Here the verb *repousser* appears to indicate repulsion — the repugnance felt not for the site of the injury but for what has

been removed. Itself an injury, *la taille* is nevertheless intended to excise deceased limbs, to lose dead weight. This aspect of writing, it would seem, is thus meant not to immortalize what has been lost but rather to rid one of its ballast.

In the following paragraph Cixous goes on to explain the ambivalently volitional and productive aspect of this pseudo-censorship. Again, the cuts made between the final extant proof and the definitive *Édition des femmes* text are enlightening (the most significant are indicated here by bold text in square brackets):

On me rapproche des gestes contradictoires: ‘Tu fous le camp pour t’épargner la traversée de la boucherie; mais tu te gêne[s] pas pour détailler ton texte. Tu coupes, si ça te chante.’ Je l’affirme, je fais tout ce que je peux pour éviter des coupures irréparables. Mon gosse, mon texte **[souffre d’une hyperlaxité musculaire, mais]** je le relie scrupuleusement: je cherche, s’il lui advient une déchirure à le recoudre bord à bord. Ou à le déchirer, pour me donner le plaisir de le régénérer. Je soupçonne d’ailleurs les flics, la censure et tous les mecs de ce genre d’intervenir parfois dans nos affaires les plus intimes **[les miennes et celles de Jean]** point nommé pour qu’on se taille. (p. 128)

Once more we are confronted with a *taille*, a textual cutting, intended to ‘éviter des coupures irréparables’. This is an aesthetics of injury that suppresses ‘nos affaires les plus intimes’ — here the reference to Genet and the potential reference to her son are kept in bold brackets above — in order to protect them from harm precisely by inflicting it. But *ce qui est coupé repousse*: what has been cut *repulses* and, by the same token, *regrows* as the author tears up her text — like Genet, quite literally — ‘pour me donner le plaisir de le régénérer’. Without direct reference to *Souffles*, the author redeploys the larger constellation of metaphors and motifs discussed above in her *Rencontre terrestre* with Jeannet when she admits that certain of her texts ‘repousseront en rejets’.⁴⁷ But this literary strategy is expressed perhaps most lucidly in *L’Amour du loup* (2003) and revisited in *Stigmata*:

Quand j’écris je ne fais rien exprès, sinon halte. Ma seule intervention volontaire est l’interruption. Rompre. Couper. Lâcher. Couper est un art que j’ai acquis. Rien de plus naturel et de plus nécessaire. [. . .] Pincer le vif. Faire mal pour faire du bien.⁴⁸

In *Pompes funèbres* and *Souffles* the wound is both locus and medium of such a benevolent aesthetics of injury. Predicting in advance the variety of impending (self-) censorship and readerly resistance that results from their provocation, it is through these polyvalent, grotesque figures that the fragmented artwork continues to make meaning. This procedure is not necessarily readily apparent. No one until now — not even Cixous herself — has examined all the wounded drafts of *Souffles* that are recombined to create the published text; we are left with traces alone — scars testifying to an aesthetics of injury that has been concealed. But *Pompes funèbres* also experiences a return of the repressed in so far as Gallimard’s re-edition

⁴⁷ Cixous and Jeannet, *Rencontre terrestre*, p. 59.

⁴⁸ Hélène Cixous, ‘Conversation avec l’âne: écrire aveugle’, in *L’Amour du loup et autres remords* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2003), pp. 75–105 (p. 88); also included in *Stigmata* as ‘Writing Blind: Conversation with the Donkey’, trans. by Eric Prenowitz, pp. 115–25 (p. 119)). Mairéad Hanrahan also quotes this passage in an article discussing many of the issues addressed here, similarly revealing cutting to be a productive and polyvalent strategy in Cixous’s work; see M. Hanrahan, ‘Long Cuts’, *Parallax*, 13.3 (2007), 37–48 (p. 40).

in their Imaginaire series (1978) curiously takes up the text of the 1947/1948 original (although the copyright is erroneously given as 1953) rather than the text of the *Œuvres complètes*: without any mention whatsoever, the censored text has been rehabilitated.

A hole, as such, is present in its very absence; and, accordingly, the textual omissions I have been examining reveal while concealing, add while subtracting, heal through injury. These signifiers seem to eschew definitive arrival at meaning, never settling on any given signified — always growing, deforming, reforming, and beginning once again. Cixous, returning to her central concern with birth, gives a perfectly succinct (if homonymically encoded [*il naît*]) illustration of this procedure on the last page of *Souffles* in her description of the work itself: ‘*Sur la table ce livre aux mille feuilles enceintes entre lesquelles il a pu se glisser: lacune. Il n’est*’ (p. 223, emphasis original). Born of its own negation, the artwork issues from its holes.