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Puisse

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This little word that captures Derrida's attention in *H. C. pour la vie*, that captivates him, that stops him in his tracks, that makes his heart skip a beat to the rhythm of the heart of the other might also mark the most decisive, if subtle, difference between them.¹ It is not by accident that I use the word "decisive." The stakes are high—in question is nothing less than the philosophy of possibility and impossibility, a central pivot on which art, politics, and life in all its forms turn. This *puisse* might just mark the moment, for Derrida, when Cixous arrives, when her thought happens to him like what in *Politiques de l'amitié*, he calls a "passive decision," which, for him, means, "the decision of the other." Of the absolute other in me, the other as the absolute that decides on me in me.² But how does he respond? Is Derridean deconstruction rendered powerless in the face of her *toute-Puissance Autre* of literature? Does he abandon himself to her mighty thought of *puisse*? Does he accept it?

In an interview with both Derrida and Cixous, the contours of the syncopation between them start to take shape. For Derrida, the possible is always already shot through with the impossible. "To decide," for example, "one must cross through the impossibility of the decision."³ Something cannot *arrive* without it being incalculable, unpredictable, and, more than that, without it being something of which I am incapable: "An event is possible only as impossible, beyond 'I can [*je peux*].'" The epithet "passive," then, does not mean that there is an other who is any more able to make the decision *for* me, instead of me, in my place. Rather, there is always an other in me, in my place, and hence, as he explains in *Politiques de l'amitié*, there is neither the activity associated with sovereign freedom nor "the passivity that is mated to it."⁴ In this way, Derrida breaks the link, often made in the political sphere, between event and decision. So as to preserve the eventness of the event, the decision for X must be impossible which does not mean that that outcome is entirely predictable but that I necessarily possibly not decide for X, so that the decision comes to me from the other without anticipation or calculation.

In the interview, Cixous jumps in to say that this means responsibility for Derrida is both absolute and blind. I am responsible for what I cannot see coming. If, as he puts it, this is a responsibility of the other, the other in me, before me, and as me, it is "an absolute yes to the other, and totally blind."⁵ He replies that "this exposure to what is irreducibly *other*" is and in fact "can only take the form of powerlessness."⁶ He

goes on to link this to unconditional hospitality, to visitation without invitation. This is the moment when Cixous offers her corrective, when her thought arrives. On the one hand, he ought perhaps to have seen this intervention coming; he does after all spill much ink in *H. C. pour la vie* on the *puissance* of her *puisse*, as the interviewer will prompt him in a moment to discuss. On the other hand, there is already in this précis of his engagement with her *puisse* a gesture of appropriation or assimilation that undoes the eventness of her *puisse* even as he announces and forswears it. And yet she has just quietly insisted: “For me, this exposure to the other takes the form of acquiescence: what translates, for you, in terms of powerlessness, is, for me, a power that accepts submission, infinite acceptance.”⁷ He rapidly clarifies: “It’s not a powerlessness of simple resignation, of weakness, but rather of abandonment.”⁸ What is there, however, (that comes) between acceptance and abandonment?

Whatever there is, we do not learn it here. First, Cixous is content to chime in on his side to elaborate, setting aside the question of acceptance and without putting any pressure on the critical distance between them: “You arrive (to yourself) where you were not expecting (yourself).” At this juncture the interviewer directs them to Derrida’s discussion in *H. C. pour la vie* of her use of the word *puisse*. Immediately, the other from whom this mighty power comes is gone, vanished:

Puisse is one of these precious possibilities of the French language which are given to me, which I transform and put into play: I tried to elaborate a logic of the efficacy of such a *puisse*. . . . The *puisse* at work in Hélène’s texts, this strange subjunctive, which is thus neither an imperative nor an indicative, is situated on this tangential line which I follow between the possible and the impossible. I try to think otherwise what the philosophical tradition, from Aristotle to Hegel, bequeathed us with regard to the possible.⁹

If here Cixous has vanished, evaporated into the philosophical labor of taking on the tradition on the great question of the possible, we might rather think of this as an escape. Her *puisse* flees his theoretical mastery, flies the coop, like the women, birds, and robbers she has time and time again evoked invoked since *Le Rire de la Méduse*.¹⁰ Without any more ruffling of feathers, the interview moves onto another topic on which they appear to have a common understanding (the right to the secret). It is, therefore, to other dialogues between the two of them—ones in which her wings are not so rapidly clipped—that we must turn to prise open this subtle gap or difference between abandonment and acceptance. Both acceptance and abandonment have to do with the gift, as we shall see in more detail, but at first blush, it is evident that one entails taking to oneself and the other giving oneself up or over.

Between this taking and giving, there is, if not exactly two sides of a dispute, then two modes of negotiating the (im)possible or even two kinds of faith in the (im)possible that reflect their tussle over who is on the side of life and who is on the side of death. This “almost interminable argument,”¹¹ as Derrida describes it, takes place over the telephone, a cord that connects the two of them like the line, for her, connects the recently deceased to the living. If he insists that he is on the side of death—and hence on

the side of what introduces the incalculable into life and the possible—she reveals how he is in fact engaging in a subtle calculation. The logic of his ruse resembles the stratagem that Cixous analyses in *Lettres de fuite* by way of a phrase that “ricochets” no less than six times on two consecutive pages of Derrida’s “La littérature au secret”: “Pardon de ne pas vouloir dire,” which David Wills translates as “pardon for not meaning (to say)” to point to the double sense of “to want to say” and “to mean.”¹² Derrida puts the words into the mouth of Abraham, arguing that the test that God sets him is whether he can keep an infinite secret, even “all the way to hyperbole, to the point where not meaning to say becomes so radical that it is almost confused with ‘not being able to mean (to say) [ne pas pouvoir vouloir dire].”¹³ Cixous uses this phrase in “Le manuscrit volant” to refer to the holding back in their exchanges (“you know what he’s like”).¹⁴

In *Hyperrêve*, she replays their telephone exchanges, explaining how he’s not meaning/wanting to say when he insists that he is on the side of death, that one dies too quickly, as if he were trying to win her over to his side.¹⁵ She swiftly works out, though, that this is a ruse to persuade her to double down on her belief that one lives too quickly—a belief that she begins to wonder if she ever held. The effect, though, of his strenuous denial of what he would secretly like to believe is to manipulate her into denying her own doubts. In this way, these exchanges at a distance and calculated taking of position are not so remote from the way in which Proust’s narrator calculates that adhering to denial and disavowal in his missives is most likely to win Albertine back to his side (*LF*, 47–8). For his part, Derrida’s secret want, which he cannot bring himself consciously to admit let alone to say out loud, is summed up by that little yet mighty word *puisse*:

Would that I might [*puissé-je*] believe her, I wish I *might* [*puisse*], yes . . . she should teach me what I mean when I say, “I wish I *might* what I cannot” [*ce que je veux dire quand je dis “il faudrait que je puisse”*]. I cannot, but in saying “I wish I *might*,” without really knowing if I think what I am saying [*sans bien savoir si je pense ce que je dis*], and what “to think what one says” means [*veut dire*], well, in saying, “I wish I *might* believe her;” . . . well, yes [*si*], maybe, maybe it is *as if* [*comme si*] I believed her already, yes.¹⁶

Derrida then proceeds to analyze the stakes of this jussive subjunctive for the possible. In a first step, he disaggregates belief and possibility: on the one hand, I may believe something and it may be possible (with or without my hoping it is), and yet, on the other hand, something may be possible without my believing it. Further, there is a significant difference between believing in something and believing in something someone tells. This gap reduces when what the other tells me is a matter of prediction or probability, but it becomes infinite when I must take their word for it beyond all calculation. Belief in the strong sense, “in the mighty sense [*le sens puissant*] of the word . . . no longer belongs to the order of the possible”:

To believe when it is possible and measurable only by the yardstick of the possible, is not yet to believe. If one hears the full might of meaning [*toute la puissance de*

sens] this word has, to believe should then lie and only reside in this impossible faith in the impossible. Then one could believe only in miracles. And to believe would be the miracle, the magical power [*la puissance magique*] of the miracle.¹⁷

The first observation here is the irony that Derrida himself engages in a calculating stratagem when he sticks to his denials, questioning whether the impossible is in fact beyond all calculation precisely when he is insisting on that against Cixous. The second observation would be that we are in the domain of *mögen*: “That’s to want or to will and to be able to, to have the power [*vouloir et pouvoir*]” (IN, 58/76). This German word is one of two “words of power [*mots de puissance*], magic words, passwords [*mots de passe*] . . . *bon mots*” (IN, 74/57) that Cixous has for Derrida in “Le manuscrit volant” and around which they have “sojourned” (75/57). Staging another conversation between them she invokes what he means/wants to say while also subtly refusing to play by his rules. On one level, it is a matter of translation. What makes *mögen* difficult to translate into French is that it has a wealth of “unheard-of resources, inaudible in translation” and, specifically, a sense of uncertainty: “to be able to do something one wants to do but that one is not sure of being able to do” (IN, 75–6/57–8). By contrast, *unmöglich* seems straightforwardly certain, and yet Cixous engages in a tussle. Initially at least, she is purportedly having a conversation with her mother, but the dynamic strikingly resembles the ones she has on the phone with Derrida about life and death.

Das ist unmöglich, it’s impossible, it’s not at all possible a hundred percent. *Das ist möglich*, it’s possible, not 100% out of a hundred.

– Where is the willing or wanting in *Unmöglichkeit*?
– *Unmöglich*? There’s nothing to be done!—Ganz *unmöglich*, it’s utterly impossible.

Möglich, it seems possible

– And *Vermögen*? the verb—It means that I want nearly. I could but it’s not obligatory, there’s a possibility, says my mother. (IN, 76/58)

What at first presents as a contrast (on the one hand, the impossible that admits of no possibility, on the other, possibility, which is always still possible and possibly not) breaks down under the pressure of her pressing questions, as if auscultating to find the wanting [*vouloir*] in impossibility. She wants impossibility otherwise:

– *Es ist ja unmöglich*: so it’s impossible. It’s a word that allows several possibilities, you see. *Es könnte möglich sein, neh?* It could be possible, huh.

You need this word?

– Not me, Jacques Derrida.

– It’s not possible. *Das Wort ist wirklich unmöglich. Ob er mögt oder nicht* It’s really an elastic word says my mother, overwhelmed. (IN, 77/58–9)

Would that impossibility be possible! That is her wish. And there, under the mighty power of her *puisse*, suddenly “it could be possible.” Then her confession:

I would so like to be able to want to be capable of the impossible say I to myself. It will be necessary all the same that I might. I sense very well (I sense sans knowing sans certainty sans presumption) I sense very well that if you cannot “come” to Barcelona nothing prevents you from being there: There is no limit or boundary to the suppleness of being. (*IN*, 79/60).

On the face of it, this seems to fly in the face of Derrida’s insistence that one not possibilize the impossible. To his mind, Heidegger’s error in the notion of being-for-death is to make the impossible—death as that of which I am not capable, as the power of a non-power—possible. What is proper to *Dasein* is the possibility of, being capable of, impossibility. In *H. C. pour la vie*, Derrida distinguishes the Cixousian *puisse* from this ontologization of the impossible, arguing that, insofar as she is *for* life, this *for* is a matter of substitutability and infinite replacement and prostheticity and not of being (*HC* 78–80/86–9). What rescues Cixous, in his reading, is that her mighty power of life, the performativity that is the very condition of possibility for all performatives, is “still living death, living it for oneself, for the other, and for life” (80/89).

How can this be when she wants to be capable of the impossible? Perhaps Cixous is not being entirely straight forward when she says this. Perhaps she senses—without the presumption of a calculation—that he will, on his side, will his abandonment precisely if she, on her side, holds to the acceptance of what happens to her. “I am inhabited by the enormous force of the *Unmöglichkeit*. This is the word that comes to me. I bless it” (*IN*, 75/57). The subtle difference between them seems to turn on this benediction. Instead of seeking for-give-ness for not meaning/wanting to say, Cixous’s writing offers a *bon-dire* that countersigns the letter on arrival. The power of her writing accepts, even blesses, the power of replacement given to her like grace. Its jussive subjunctive collapses the difference, he says, between making and letting arrive, annuls the difference between activity and passivity.¹⁸ Writing is already the substitution on the spot of this mighty power of life *for* life, in exchange for life, letter for letter. Her *puisse* only has the power, is only capable of the impossible, without her being able to do anything about it (*sans que j’y puisse rien*), apart from the benediction of saying “yes.”¹⁹ In this way, Derrida makes/lets omnipotence be impotence on condition that it not be the opposite of potency.²⁰ He subjunctivizes omnipotence: Would that omnipotence might be impotence! And perhaps one is left with the sneaking suspicion that Cixous has been replaced on the spot, that her mighty *puisse* has already flown away.²¹ Would that she might arrive!