



Benjamin Gagnon Chainey // If Death is a paradoxical mother, Ève, the dying mother of French philosopher and writer Hélène Cixous, is even more so. In her daughter's phraseology, Ève Cixous is "a well alive dead woman" [1], coming back to life through the "Strange Autoportraits" that Hélène draws in *Homère est Morte...* (the English translation, *Homer is Dead...*, misses the curious femininity that Cixous ascribes to Homer(e)) (*HM*, 111). In this poetic end-of-life testimony of the last days of

her vanishing mother, the daughter H el ene writes at  eve’s bedside about two embodied experiences: her mother’s uncertain dying and her own witnessing of that dying.

 eve’s body and language are slowly fading in front of H el ene Cixous’ gaze, as she tries to glimpse at suffering as a “kaleidoscope of coming times” in the suspension of the three small dots hanging from the death of her mother, but the spectacle of her suffering body and ill language extends both sight and life (HM, 135). Death is no longer a period, it is suspension points. Homer /  eve is not dead, she is suspended at those points, clinging to the gaze of the Other who is talking to her, her daughter who is watching over her.

Through the eyes and words of H el ene Cixous, the act of watching over the suffering body and language becomes a “transfigurative art,” a crossing of gazes that gives life back to the dying Other, while escaping from sight, becoming invisible to the bare eyes (HM, 111). How, however, can H el ene see her mother dying if dying is properly escaping from sight as well as from life, fleeing from the visible world? How can one see death if it is the advent of invisibility? Through the eyes of H el ene Cixous, dying is a strange *passage*, oscillating *between* the visible and the invisible. There is the embodiment of the invisible in the visible body of dying  eve: “this night my mother really saw the Invisible entering. Maybe Death had begun her campaign. Maybe had she cast upon us her spell and were we at her mercy, or subject to her strange kindness” (HM, 27).

Dying is the transformative performance of a constant passage between visible forms and invisible informs, a materialization of invisible psychic suffering into visible physical pain, and a reversed transubstantiation of the dying languages into performative bodies:

I pour a flow of ideas like tears: – like in the page layout one can see the mental strength, and so, reciprocally, the manual strength of my midwife mother [...] – there was in these notebooks all that we needed to save ourselves from the abyss. [...] those unsuitable and misunderstood pains. Those flexible answers, those sensible reflections to the variations of anguish. (HM, 32)

If apprehension of suffering and Death is based on the variations of anguish, an embodied experience of a “feeling of ambiguity[2]” founded on a “yet to arrive” fear, then watching over her dying mother becomes the apprehension of “possibilities,” an omen of future goods or misfortunes. Ratcliffe writes, “[Our] sense of others involves a bodily response that is inextricable from a distinctive way of experiencing *possibilities*” (SIE, 221). Pain is not always visible a priori, and it can also be a potential performance still to come. If suffering is sometimes invisible, maybe it is because it is so on borrowed time; it is gestating, upstream from the gaze that would know how to see it, the gesture that would know how to touch it, the language that would know how to predict it.

January 13, 2013, she is complaining about a violent pain under her right foot. I did not see anything. I palpated her toes, her foot plant. The large and solid foot of mom. January 14, a blackish mass of blood formed an enormous pouch under her heel. (HM, 33)

The physical wound performs like a coagulation of the psychic suffering, the visible materialisation of invisible anguish: the passage from one state to another, the transformation of one shape to another. There is transubstantiation. Likewise, the blood clot is born from the blood turbulence, the visible forms seem to be bodies that were born from the turbulence of invisible forms. Anguish. Fears of seeing the Other disappear. Suffering of watching over our own suffering, dying mother.

The materialization of the wound therefore becomes a performative dispossession of suffering senses, transformative shifts in the meaning of bodies, languages and representations. “At the end, only the mom’s head resists the fire. She keeps her head emerged above the disaster, the gnawed sanguineous body hidden under the sheet that she fights for tooth and nail” (HM, 33).

Hidden in the hollow of the bed, Ève defends herself against Death as much as against the gazes turned on her and on the Death arriving upon her. Maybe Ève is asking herself: is my Death arriving from all these gazes on my dying body? Is dying only the death of the visible? Is the reality of suffering and sorrow only founded on its visible materiality? The experience of dying by Hélène watching over Ève advances in a precarious imbalance between the visible and the invisible. Death wins ground over of the visible body. Death is a thief of the Visible. Therefore, dying becomes an act of dispossession. Who owns the visible? Who owns the invisible? Death takes possession of Ève’s body by stealing what makes it visible to the living world, to the bare eyes of her daughter Hélène. Glimpses of the dying mother emerge from a “no woman’s land,” a battlefield to be seen by her own eyes and Hélène’s eyes on her, eyes that no longer know how to see it, how to keep the visible for themselves. Wounds become visible soldiers of an (in)visible war.

The army of wounds advances on the old field, the tissues fold on themselves, the skin blisters and comes off. I examine the diminished upper ties; I search for a few square centimeters still capable to receive a sting of calciparin. There are fewer and fewer. I need to attack her to defend her. I can only lean on this brief part of the body. How far will we go, how far, till when, this “pharmakonnerie”, and at each sting I lose and I win a little bit of skin, a little bit of blood.”
(HM, 34)

The war for the visible ground of the dying body is not only ambiguous but is also propelled by the Unknown. Where, when, how and how far will we go? Dying is both an ambivalent experience and a performance, acted and lived in a “no woman’s land,” a mined battlefield of sensorial, sentimental and semantic uncertainty. The embodied experiences and performances of suffering bodies are disorienting. They blend sensations, blur sights, cross gazes by and on dying persons. Their inner and reciprocal feelings become equivocal, and their meanings are fleeting.

The embodied performance of watching over a dying body is indeed a moving experience that can transfigure the glimpses of a dying mother into some transformative pieces of art, like the birthing notebooks that Ève wrote and drew during her active life as a midwife, which Hélène is reads while she keeps watch at her mother’s bedside. Ève gave birth to Hélène; likewise, she gave birth to many people, and her notebooks are now being read and cared for by Hélène like living bodies. In her caring daughter’s eyes, Ève’s “birthing handbooks” become “performative masterpieces” of the

Unknown, strange and yet-to-come “philosophical beauties” to be glimpsed at from the end-of-life experience. Perhaps are they oracles for Hélène’s own writings, including *Homère est morte...* which in turn also watches over and cares for *its* dying mother, who carries on living through its literary gazes upon her performances, both bodily and poetic.

Take a look at these [notebooks]: two philosophical beauties, one hundred pages of illustrated analysis, patient, wise, drafted in a strong calligraphy, harmonious, that breath profoundly, a performative masterpiece, where we don't know who's in charge, and if it is for the better. The handbook is itself born from a successful delivery. (HM, 32)

Featured Image: Hélène Cixous by Claude Truong-Ngoc, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

[1] Hélène Cixous. (2014). *Homère est morte...*, Paris, Galilée, 2014, p. 21. My translation (Now HM in the text)

[2] Matthew Ratcliffe. (2013). “The Structure of Interpersonal Experience”. in Rasmus Thybo Jensen et Dermot Moran (Eds.). *The Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, p. 222. (Now SIE in the text)