Dream-reading the burning book: Cixous, Freud and the Song of Songs

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Cixous’s theories of reading via Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly the analysis of Dora, and Freud’s work on dreams, are framed by the curious echoes and resonances of the Song of Songs that appear in Cixous’s engagements. It is possible in light of this affinity that Cixous’s insights into reading such as those she describes in the School of Dreams could bear a subtle and fecund way of reading the Song of Songs, though to embrace such a reading transforms the reader in unanticipated ways.

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J’ai un peu peur pour ce livre. Parce que c’est un livre d’amour. C’est un buisson de feu. Mieux vaut s’y jeter. Une fois dans le feu, on est inondé de douceur. J’y suis: je vous le jure.
—Hélène Cixous, Le Livre de Promethea

In her project one cannot escape the observation that Hélène Cixous weaves between Freud and Lacan (Dunn 1998). Derrida might say—in their shared valuing of the poetic—that her writing appears in “the shadow of this shadow” as a “birth of light” (Derrida 2010: 171).” Like Lacan, there are tracts in Cixous’s writing that could be considered a ‘return to Freud’, staged as a rereading: post-Freudian. From yet another
view, she is aligned tangentially with the tenets of the Freudian and Lacanian schools of Psychoanalysis, simultaneously engaging in a subversive project that moves beyond them and deconstructs them.

The attraction of Freud and psychoanalysis as a whole for Cixous is its particular focus on how sexuality is constructed in the subject. This is a focus that is particularly relevant for the Song of Songs, which is the Bible’s burning book (of desire) and a book that Cixous (2008) describes as containing “… a philosophy, at once impassioned and formidable, of existence, beginnings and endings, of the battle between love and death … [engendering] all the great poetic texts and theatrical fictions.” (41).

In Cixous’s corpus there are multiple and vocal intersections with Freud and his studies, and one in which she draws on the Song of Songs. A primary example is her engagement with Freud in his female casework, particularly the case of ‘Dora’. Dora came to Freud having been sent by her father after several years of symptomatic ‘hysteria’ culminating in suicidal tendencies. She would become one of Freud’s most famous failed cases (Scull 2009). Freud’s publication of the case *Fragment of an analysis of a case of Hysteria* (1905/1997) revolved around the interpretation of several dreams, one in which she dreams she is trapped inside a burning house. The story that emerges in the case of Dora is one of violation and betrayal by those closest to her. Rather than exploring this understanding of her own suffering, Freud entered into a complex and contradictory interpretation of Dora’s sexual life. Forced upon her, was an alternate rendering of her trauma. This trauma, Freud figured, stemmed from her secret desire for these sexual violations of her childhood (Scull 2009: 150). Of Dora’s sexuality, Freud claims: “These masculine or, more properly speaking, gynaecophilic currents of feeling are to be regarded as typical of the unconscious erotic life of
hysterical girls” (Freud 1977). Freud asserts, with this masterstroke, the unconscious and normative psychopathology of feminine sexuality.

Cixous enters the scene. For Cixous, hysteria is a site of collision or ‘condensation’ of the multiple distresses experienced by woman in a ‘masculine’ world. Here on the body of the female hysteric is inscribed a textual map to be read by the male analyst. Willis (1985) describes this woman as condensed into “body-image-spectacle” (288) for Freud’s ‘masculine’ gaze.

Cixous (2008) intersects Freud’s casework on Dora at multiple sites in her essay *Sorties* and in the dramatic production of the story of Freud’s analysis of Dora in her play *Portrait de Dora* (2004). In *Sorties*, her thoughts culminate in the following panegyric:

It is you, Dora, who cannot be tamed, the poetic body, you are the true “mistress” of the Signifier. Before tomorrow your effectiveness will be seen to work—when your words will no longer be retracted, pointed against your own breast, but will write themselves against the other and against men’s grammar. Men must not have that place for their own any more than they have us for their own (Cixous 2008: 95).

For Cixous, in the hysteric and in the sad story of Dora is the poignancy of the feminine, the unveiling of the imaginary—a gift. In Freud’s scene of the art gallery, Dora sits fascinated by the image of the Madonna and [girl]-child, the resurrection of the pre-Oedipal mother. Here is the rebirth of lost feminine language, a “reignition” of feminine jouissance, a multiplicity of molten sexuality: a language complicit with dreams (French 2008: 254).

For Cixous, Freud is aligned with the Name of the Father, the patriarchal economy that leaves woman mute. ‘Dora’ is the *femme fatale*, whose ‘hysterical’ and tumultuous
speaking-of-the-body ruptures the *propre* of sexual economy, and brings the phallocratic pillars of Freudian theory to the brink by immolation. Cixous is engaged in a series of exchanges that will see psychoanalytic metaphors of woman as lack overlaid with metaphors of woman as excess. And more so, in place of the debilitated and bleak form of Ida Bauer, whose body Cixous recreates in mythic form, pairing Ida’s ‘Dora’ with Medusa of the Gorgons. As Dunn eloquently describes:

... a mythological figure who continues to haunt patriarchy. She continues to blow up the Law of the Father. Her words, coming to us in twisted form, still rise up against the master/author of her story (Dunn 1998: n.p.).

In Cixous’s own words in “Laugh of the Medusa” we see Dora phase into the glorious monster:

Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing (Cixous 1976: 885).

Cixous is incensed when Freud (1990) attempts to further demarcate feminine sexuality, in *The Question of Lay Analysis*. Freud (1990) describes woman (and at this point his language is rife with metaphor) as a primitive ‘dark continent’, an arable, unexplored land, desirous, black, opaque, obtuse. As he writes:

But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all the sexual life of adult women is a ‘dark continent’ for psychology. But we have learnt that little girls feel deeply their lack of a sexual organ that is equal in value to the male one; they
regard themselves on that account as inferior, and this ‘envy for the penis’ is the origin of a whole number of characteristic feminine reactions (Freud 1990: 38).

In “Sorties,” Cixous (2008) counters by rending this assertion with an extravagant rewriting that challenges the attribution of lack, filling the same space with generosity, dispersal, and superfluity. Here she finds it essential to invoke the Song of Songs; a song where the feminine is writ large. She, Woman, is breath-taking, loved, voiced, beautiful, searing and awesome (i.e. Son 6:4-10).

We, coming early to culture, repressed and choked by it, our beautiful mouths stopped up with gags, pollen, and short breaths; we the labyrinths, we the ladders, we the trampled spaces; the stolen and the flights — we are "black" and we are beautiful (Cixous, 2008: 69).

The erotic awakening of Shulamith and her lover in the Song of Songs mirrors the feminine awakening Cixous (2008) imagines in “Sorties.” Just as Cixous’s platform for the salvation of Dora is word and text, so is the poetess’s. They find a way through language that liberates the feminine, liberates voice. Their texts in deconstructive mutuality: at once prurient and innocent, at once worldly wise and utopian in vision; voluptuous, generous and exultant.

In many ways, Cixous’s text imaginings are limited to this—mere poetics—a critique put forward by Anglo-American feminists like Toril Moi (2002: 121-126) or also from among French contemporaries, such as Catherine Clément in her exchange in La Jeune Née (Clément 1975: 292-3). The sad truth is Ida Bauer’s life was full of suffering; full of the qualities that Cixous lists here as obstacles: choked into submission (by those who profess love her), her mouth stopped (not least by Freud), gagged, suffocated, rejected. She was not to become a revolutionary Anna O., (Bertha Pappenheim) who
went on from her ‘talking cure’ to become an influential figure in Austrian feminism and the pioneer of the Jüdischer Frauenbund. Dora never achieved the utopian heights Cixous dreamed into writing in “Sorties.” She would never become in life that cosmic Gorgon Cixous envisioned. Cixous takes this failure into herself, joining herself to it, calling the hysterics “my sisters” and saying of her own history “I am what Dora would have been if woman’s history had begun” (Cixous 2008: 99). In light of this dream comes a subtle moment of ascendancy narrated by the voice of the play.

Voice of the play: In May of 1900. In Vienna, at a crossroads where there was a great deal of traffic, Dora saw Mr K. get knocked down by a carriage. She saw him fall. It was the most horrible day of her life. It was the happiest day of her life. She walked across the avenue dry-shod, lifting her elegant dress with her fingertips, barely allowing her ankles to show. It was only a minor accident. The inside of Mr K. was in hell, his outward appearance was still prepossessing. He had seen Dora pass. There is no greater sorrow than the memory of love. And that, Freud knew. (Cixous 2004: 58).

The book of dreams

In the corpus of Hélène Cixous, if Freudian thought had not been such a veritable Lascaux of possibilities she would not have taken the time to delve so deeply into its caverns, chambers and naves, alive with those prehistoric images of the magical and mystical, of wild things, wild horses, the eternal running of the bulls, made alive by the hands of first poets, first painters. Cixous, in her writing and her literary theory, seems bent on a romance with primordial interiors, in this affaire de cœur with a wild unconscious, which evidences her subterranean embrace of the psychoanalytic in her language. Dunn (1998) considers that for Cixous, the unconscious is an “unmediated
space outside of culture” (n.p.). Because the unconscious is repressed, it becomes a site of association with other kinds of cultural repression such as the feminine and that of cultural minorities or the colonized. Here she finds insights into the novel, openings into the poetic, and ferry crossings to the ‘other’-side of the interior landscape of her texts. It is the fecund possibilities for languaging this interior landscape which holds her fascination; the way in which language facilitates and frustrates the subterranean entry. Not least it is Freud’s belief in the work of dreams—Dora’s incendiary dreams.

What the dream shows us in its theatre is the translation, in the open, of what we cannot see, of what is not visible but can be sensed in reality. (Cixous 2003: 27).

For Cixous, the unconscious is a source of creativity, something she couples with conscious writing or reading. Her work with texts is prurient. She writes with a “double voice” (Lie 2005: 3) that is a touch, caress and ‘coupling’ that traverses the inner and outer worlds. Hers is a visceral approach to reading/writing texts that flows between the body, the unconscious, prehistory, text, circulating like blood, schooled by dreams.

The Song of Songs is replete with dreams. It is a book of dreams, of dreaming. In the Song these figure as a sublime merging of dreamed dreams, imaginings, daydreams, fantasies and nightmares. She (the text) leaves us to wonder if she dreamed the poem, or if she was dreamed by the dream. Not long after we begin to read, we also come to question who dreamed who in this text. The reader herself becomes part of the dream. This ambiguity is part of the poem’s brilliance. Reality and fantasy are neither concrete nor discrete in the Song of Songs. Reality is fantasized, fantasy is realized—and is that from which the poem continually escapes, taking the reader with her (Exum 2005: 45-6).
By night on my bed I sought him
The one I love with all my breath
I sought him and could not find him (Son 3:1)

The Song of Songs features as a sequence of inter-connected poetic vignettes featuring
the primary protagonist, a woman and/or a ‘Shulamith’ and her ‘dream’ encounters with
a series of other characters: her ‘male’ lover, the daughters of Jerusalem, her brothers,
her mother and the nefarious ‘watchmen’. Just as in a series of merging and unmerging
dreams, the language and logic of each scenario do not adhere to a linear and logical
narrative. The text streams in a manner reminiscent of streams of consciousness (Keel
1994: 120; Mariaselvam 1988: 32-33 & 221). Scenes, scenarios, sensations,
temporalities lurch and shift. Fixating in one instant, flying away in another. Her
discourse is tempered with raw disclosures, peppered with symbolic richness, part
narratives, fantasies and confessions.
For Freud, dreams are the via regia to the “knowledge of the unconscious element in our psychic life” (Freud 1976: 324). Through analysis of dreams, like Dora’s burning house, like Shulamith’s night journeys, Freud believed he could make an invisible terrain, visible. He could bring into the present, exclusions. He could cause to be heard that which she could not/would not speak. Freud conceives dreams as representative of the wish, constituting a desire that leads the dreamer into the future:

The ancient belief that dreams reveal the future is not indeed entirely devoid of the truth. By representing a wish as fulfilled the dream certainly leads us into the future; but this future, which the dreamer accepts as his present, has been shaped in the likeness of the past by the indestructible wish (Freud 1976).

But Cixous has other uses for dreams and would never dream of putting a dream-text under analysis. She is not their master. She is in a symbiotic relationship with both dreams and dream-texts, slippery and disobedient though they are.
Dreams are the tutor of a writer, a way of getting to the ‘other’-side.

Writing is the delicate, difficult, and dangerous means of succeeding in avowing the unavowable. Are we capable of it? This is my desire. I too would like to die; though this doesn’t mean I have succeeded. I make the effort. So far I haven’t succeeded. In the meantime I do the closest thing I can. To approach the place where I can unlie and have something in common … with the dying, I go to the other school, the nearest one, the one that most resembles the School of the Dead: The School of Dreams. (Cixous 1993: 53).

But in describing dreams as a door to writing, there is a caveat—the land of dreams is a kind of travel, a destination, that can’t be forced or bought. The text cannot be browbeaten, forced to unveil, like Freud’s treatment of Dora, forced into logic and reason, drained of her dreams. A book like the Song of Songs cannot be thought through to a conclusion; unveiled. The [non]-reading of this book must bypass recipes, instructions and keys, entering intravenously. “The book is the Door” she writes, thus, the Song of Songs is for Cixous “the Dream of the other that doesn’t escape us—that dreams us and waits for us” (Cixous 1993: 58). Barthes (1975) also describes a similar kind of [non]-reading which he calls ‘dream-reading’. This is a reading practice that overwhelms, that is “sliding, euphoric, voluptuous, unitary, jubilant” (Barthes 1975: 37).
This dream-reading of a dream-text combines for Cixous all the elements of the feminine: the body, body-to-body, music, tarantella, jouissance, love. All of these accompany the poetic text. The poetic act is movement schooled by dreams.

How far must one not arrive in order to write, how far must one wander and wear out and have pleasure? One must walk as far as the night. One’s own night. Walking through the self toward the dark (Cixous 1993: 65).

In La Jeune Née, Catherine Clément writes about the ritual of the tarantella in Taranto, Italy (Clément 1976: 21). Young women, afflicted by a supernatural spider bite, conveying the whole repertoire of hysterical symptoms, enter a waking dream and dance feverishly for hours until exhausted and utterly spent. The dance is cathartic and at the end of the dance the young woman emerges from her psychotic break. The dance itself is like a dream,

Something moves in my belly. I feel full, inhabited. Perhaps it is the dream. Regardless, it feels ominous and I know deep down there is something desperately wrong. I shouldn’t be pregnant. I need to go to hospital. I tell my friends and they are warning me that I should go to the good hospitals in the city. This is not what the letter says. I have a letter from the government and it says I must go to the other one—the one I am afraid of; the one where people die.

I go against their counsel because of the letter. I must follow the instructions in the letter. If I follow the letter I will be safe from the worst.

There at the hospital, in the busy waiting room I am met by an obstetrician, a woman. (Do I know her? I don’t know how I know but it is Hélène’s mother Eve.)

The woman assures me that all is well. And for a second I feel comforted. But when I look down I see that my womb is outside my body, and that it’s displaced, somewhere near my feet.

Something has gone terribly wrong.

The mouth of the womb is opening through the sole of my foot and what is emerging holds my gaze, an obscenity, and I can’t look away. My body contracts dreadfully and gapes.

First the fangs appear through the opening, dark and sharp. Then 8 legs, long, black and haired in an iridescent blue. Black thorax, downy blue furred abdomen.

It’s a tarantula, cobalt blue—Haplopelma lividum. Beautiful and terrible. I see it there in a puddle of amniotic fluid.

—It crawls away
—everyone stares silently.
symbolizing the rejection of the world in the embrace of the imaginary. This ritual articulates through the dance, a bodily feminine jouissance; and is a potent metaphor for Cixous’s relation to her text.

The Song of Songs also plays out as a dream of complete abandonment (Lie 2005: 5) set in maternal space and set without limits. Shulamith dances (7:1) like a “dance of battalions,” a tarantella of delirious dance. She is constantly on the move, defying the logic of time and space. She moves gracefully with lightning speed (dream-speed) from scene to scene, location to location. One moment she is in Hermon in the far north (4:8), the next in Jerusalem (3:10). The reader twirls deliriously with her from place to place in a sequence of free associations, from springs and valleys, to mountaintops, the wilderness, to woodlands and fields; from Ein Gedi in the south (1:14), to Senir (4:8), then Tirzah (6:4) and Carmel (7:6) to exotic lands like Lebanon (4:8, 11, 15) and Damascus (7:5) and all around is a haze of scent and spice.

Cixous sources her creation of texts, ‘creative-writing’ as well as creative-reading from the ‘maternal’ unconscious which she describes with the terms of the female experience of pregnancy and childbearing, “A woman who writes is a woman who dreams about children” (Cixous 1993: 74). It is from this dream child that Cixous believes that it is possible to write a book that lives. The child that appears in the dream is the text and empowers the mother/author to do the impossible—to pass from the end of ourselves to the other (Cixous 1993: 71).
Our dream children are innumerable. The writing time, which is like reading time—there is latency, there is prewriting—is accompanied by a child state, what Tsvetaeva calls the “state of creation.” The unconscious tells us a book is a scene of childbirth, delivery, abortion, breast-feeding. The whole chronicle of childbearing is in play within the unconscious during the writing period. We will bring forth into the light of night innumerable children. Sometimes the child is the size of a leaf and it crumbles to pieces. Sometimes it is just a small piece of paper you put on the bed that is suddenly lost. You do not know whether it is the child who faded or whether it is you who forgot the child. Sometimes it comes into the world six months old, bigger than you are, and of course it speaks better than Shakespeare. Sometimes it’s a sticky little girl stuck to your leg, sometimes it’s a terrible cocklike little boy running mad in a room on four cock legs. The worst is the scene when the child emerges and then disappears. (Cixous, 1993: 74).

The dream has me on a rickety bamboo walkway suspended above a wetland lagoon. I don’t want to set foot on it but everything depends on it. I’m with my little daughter and I lie down with her, my arm around her. Below us, bathing in the water is a curious wild elephant. She telegraphs her trunk and the wet, mucous of the proboscis touches me. The mammoth creature doesn’t know her own strength and the pontoon begins to creak as she presses her bulk closer. I know the bamboo walkway will collapse. I call urgently for my daughter to come. I don’t think the structure will stand. She doesn’t see the danger. It is only now that I see a new terror in the water. There is a crocodile beneath the walkway, submerged in the murk.

I call my child, desperately, but she is afraid and stumbles. The elephant also pushes towards us and everything comes apart. My child slips, falls, and begins to slide into the swampy water. The crocodile takes his chance to grab her legs in his jaws. I hurl myself at the edge where she is suspended, and I am just barely able to pull her free for a moment.

—I wake suddenly in my bed, alone, exhausted and numb with distress.
This is true for the Song of Songs, whose dreams, dream-scenes, dreamy echoes seep
with milk (Son 4:11; 5:1), with the sounds of travail, with forays into the mother’s
room-womb, the girl-infant newly born (Son 6:9), the ripening and bursting of fruit in
the tree in the same scene as the birthing mother (Son 8:5), of breasts and breast milk
(Son 8:1) and of primal, maternal love, ‘life exchanges’ (Son 8:2) that are all “matters
of life and death” (Cixous 1993).

The feminine sanctuary of the Song of the Songs is a garden of dreams. For Cixous this
garden is one lost to the forgotten dream of childhood. The childhood garden of
innocence, hope, of the scent of flowers, the first tastes of fruits, all this is the
exhilaration of the wondrous, miraculous child-world: the wonders of light on dew
drops, the butter-yellow of dandelions and the epiphany of the bumblebee. “Most poets

Thus the bible dreams and “dreams quickly” (Cixous 1993: 67), the Song of Songs is
one of them. The Garden of Eden is another. A pomegranate-pink dream and a deep-
blue dream in Chagall’s imagining. They both contain trees of life. But when the Bible
forgot Eden in the dry, desert journeys of the patriarchs, a magic ladder was needed in
Cixous’s unique narration. Jacob, weary, far from home, with his head on a stone,
stumbles upon it while deep in sleep. Jacob dreams. There it is, the very ladder, upon
which the angels ascend and descend, a ladder reaching from earth right into heaven: a
“ladder of generations” (Cixous 1993). This is the same magic ladder that must be
ascended and descended in order to enter the Song’s secret garden. It is this magic
ladder, Cixous believes, that gets you over law’s many walls.
The dream takes me. Here I am, in a little fishing village in Siam which bustles with activity. Smells and sights are both exotic and familiar. My beloved grandmother is there — how did she come, what a surprise! Because I know deep down that she is dead, her appearance here has the quality of messianic arrival. I have missed her and I know the moment I look away she will vanish again. I walk with her slowly as she shuffles with her stick. I drink in the moment.

It is late afternoon and the stroll by the banana palms is so pleasant. I notice now that my whole family is there. The pause makes me slow, and now I see in the distance that my grandmother has continued down the tree lined road. I will never see her face again.

I had thought to catch up but I am distracted by something by the road. Now I see it’s my daughter. I stop to glance at her and then the next minute she is gone.

My mother is with me now and we search together, looking for her high and low. We are asking everyone but they see we are strangers and they simply stare. I ask with my best Thai. Some of them look like relatives but they don’t respond.

We search the noodle shops and restaurants, the hardware shops and through the stacks of bamboo bird cages filled with yellow birds. In one restaurant there is a long fish tank brimming with exotic yellow fish. I look up and see that the sun is going down.

Will we find her before dark?

In the period of my own Cixauldian living-reading of the Song of Songs, the subject of my doctoral studies, my dreams were vivid and poignant. I ‘lived the night’ in my dreams, waking in the morning as if I had danced the tarantella.

My dreams are scattered through this text, witnesses, to what I have lived inwardly in reading this text and in writing a poetic response. Each dream was a dream of the child, of a daughter, precious and fragile, which was the little and newly born text. These dreams were intense and I bore a relation to them that even now I cannot explain. The dream passed between me and my text. My own responsive and poetic texts to the Song of Songs became strange—

beautiful strangers—as strange as my dreams. They then contained both my wonder and my terror, strength, the sense of always being on the edge between living and dying, of violent loss, of mourning and love, and of birth. As Cixous (1993) jubilantly declares: “These dreams: what we are when we are no longer ourselves: our survivings. Prophets of our traces, of our ultimate metamorphoses. Self-portraits of our future phantoms” (106).
References


