CHAPTER 12

The Laugh of the Mother: Traces of Humor in Hélène Cixous’s Recent Fictions

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In *Le jour où je n’étais pas là*, Hélène Cixous tells the tragic story of her first child, a son born with Down Syndrome who dies in his first year of life. In the first lines of the fiction, she wonders what to do with the memory of a fault emerging from a long lost past. The question of culpability remains at the center of the story. At the point at which she finally unravels the story of her son’s death, the day that she was not there, she sits in the kitchen with her mother who is washing and snapping green beans. As her mother washes and snaps the beans, Cixous-the-narrator realizes her mother’s role in the story of her son’s death, her mother’s guilt and fault and her need not to unearth this day that she, Ève the mother, was there. In the text, it is the green beans that reveal the mother’s story of her grandson’s death. Staring at the vulnerable, headless green beans, the narrator understands that her mother does not want to relive that day, that she wants the fault to stay buried. The green beans (not the mother) say to the narrator, “Que viens-tu faire par ici ? Chez nous ? Notre mémoire reposait. Éloigne-toi !” (*Le jour* 170), and as she realizes her mother’s role in the child’s death and her need for silence, the narrator returns to the green beans, “Mais je me souviens des haricots verts. Le titre de la scène serait : « trahie mais de justesse par quelques haricots verts trop vite épluchés »” (186).

I too have returned to this scene over and over again, reflecting on the role that Cixous’s mother plays in her writing, her role in her life particularly as the mother who nourishes her body, and the role of the mundane in Cixous’s fiction. The scene of the mother cleaning and snapping green beans as key to the narrator’s understanding of her past is part of a larger picture in Cixous’s recent fiction, in which her concern with her mother and in particular her mother’s aging body, are more and more often a central discussion rather than a marginal digression. Not only does this scene of green beans demonstrate how the mundane reveals the sublime or the repressed, it is also, in my opinion, a relatively funny scene. The green beans, decapitated, are defending their executioner to the narrator. In film, this could be an animated sequence in which a line of beans lift their bodies from the colander and cry in a children’s chorus of voices, “Go away,” to the narrator. The juxtaposition of this scene and the
often serious or esoteric tone of Cixous's fiction is fascinating. Cixous's word play obviously provides playfulness in her writing, but it is also the interruption of the mundane and, more often than not, the mundane as it relates to her mother and to food, that provide traces of humor throughout Cixous's texts.

In my attempt in this essay to bring together humor, the mother, and the mundane in Cixous's texts, I will examine closely a few scenes from some of Cixous's fictions published since 2000, and then look back at the laugh of the Medusa to see what we might make of the mother's laughter in light of this prominent Cixousian figure. In each of the three main works considered in this study, *Hyperrêve* (2006), *Ciguë : Vieilles femmes en fleurs* (2008), and *Ève s'évade : La Ruine et la vie* (2009), the mother interrupts the text with moments of reality, be that the presence of her aging body, her questions about food, or her conversations about flowers, memories, and the market. These interruptions into the text have the overarching function of grounding Cixous's writing with a voice of practicality, the opposition of which to her own philosophical meanderings also creates a certain shock that renders these moments humorous to the reader.

Through these recent fictions, the laugh of the mother functions to mock or lighten her narrator-daughter's writing, but also to affirm life and the joy of life, which in turn inspires the narrator's constant task of writing. In *Hyperrêve*, as the narrator mourns the death of her dear friend, Jacques Derrida, her mother's laugh is what confirms his life. “*Tant que ma mère est là mon ami vit encore, me dis-je,*” the narrator writes as she observes her mother laughing, watching television, talking about green beans, rice, blueberries, and her old umbrella (151). It is this contemplation of her mother's life and her impending death that is most poignantly juxtaposed with the narrator's writing. In *Hyperrêve*, the text weaves together a tapestry of mundane observations on her mother's aging body, her skin in particular, and the voices of her various philosophical muses, including Derrida and Walter Benjamin. It is a conversation among voices, texts, and dreams. Her mother's voice, her age, this aging body that is another, constitute a dream within reality: “C'est un hyperrêve. Rien de plus violemment réel. Je le vois, c'est ma mère passée qui passe devant moi en réalité” (179). Deaf, her mother does not hear her daughter's call, a literal and figurative response to her daughter's worries. The anxiety that pervades this and all of Cixous's recent fiction is the fear of her mother's passing, and the effect that this will have on Cixous's writing.

Much of *Hyperrêve* sets up the scenes that are echoed and repeated, with variation, in *Ciguë* and *Ève s'évade*. Her mother's malady impedes the narrator's annual pilgrimage to Montaigne's tower, and the mother serves as an interruption, both wanted and imposed, on the narrator's task of writing. “Ma mère