Foreword: Forewarnings

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I feel a protective urge with regard to this book, a wish to shield it from the claws of a gross misreading, and I think it has to do with its relation to words. As if they're put to some other use here. Because when we think about them at all we tend to think words are just the things we use to say and to write stuff. But it turns out that's not the whole of it. I even want to say one can't understand the book, one can't make much meaningful sense of it, if one doesn't understand what a word is – for Nicholas Royle, for Hélène Cixous for Nicholas Royle. Nicholas Royle's words are not what we think, in any case, and indeed the ones in this book are constantly shaking up our thinking, whether we know it or not, along with our relations to the world and each other. Words clearly whisper weird and wonderful things in Nicholas Royle's ear, and he's our guide here on an incredible voyage among them.

This secret understanding with words comes to Royle no doubt from literature or poetry, that place where words are cherished in their own right and given free range, never pressed narrowly into service as the simple vehicles of a discourse. It comes to him from Jacques Derrida, who so frequently puts himself and his thinking at the service of a word. And it comes to him from Hélène Cixous, this being one of the primary things Nicholas Royle demonstrates in the book: the extraordinary cixousian world of words and how it speaks to and resonates with the royle word world.

Maybe every true writer or poet has some fetish words, some lexical intimates they keep returning to or never leave. Theorists and philosophers also have fetish words, but the similarities stop there. Any 'theorist' worth his or her salt must invent, and claim rights to, a new concept. But then this concept must be identifiable, it must be labelled in order to enter the marketplace of ideas: the

new concept needs a new word that will function as its name, its handle, its code. Naturally, this theory-word must not have a mind of its own: it is there only to fix the new concept, to identify it in a durable manner, so that property rights can be exercised over it. Or to put it more charitably, so that the concept in question can be used effectively, and shared, reappropriated – often, it must be said, for a good cause. Commodifying ideas by means of word-markers is often a strategic necessity in political/theoretical debates and struggles.

Now it is no secret Nicholas Royle has some special word affinities (telepathy, uncanny, mole, veering ... to name a few that have appeared in his titles), so which side is he on? If I had to choose, I wouldn't hesitate to put him with the poets, with certain wordy poets, but things are a bit more complicated: Royle is hard to place, and this difficulty is a key element of the book. He intentionally dissolves the lines between poetry and theory such that his multifaceted writing glints at times with enlightening critical, theoretical reflections and scintillates at others with poetic flashes and underground fibre-optical gleams. The irony, of course, is that it's not the word-playing poets but the apparently more rational theorists who have a naïve relation to words: they assume they can domesticate words and take ownership of them, that it is within their power as theorists to fix a word to a concept, and that words fixed in this way will hold tight. Indeed, they often succumb to a form of magical thinking, and hang their coat with a sigh on the newly coined word as if the word in its concrete reality guaranteed the solidity of the new concept. Nicholas Royle is not a theorist of this ilk, even if he carefully leaves the door always ajar, never repudiating or abjuring theory. His relation to words, to his 'fetish' words in particular, is never anti- or un-theoretical, but they are always for him in the first and last instance a poet's words: shifting, metamorphing, as-yet-unknown semi-living creatures that are constantly apt to throw up surprising new sounds, syllables, groans or cries, new friends or enemies, new ideas of course, new flights of fancy. Or old, it really comes down to the same thing in this terrain: etymology, as Royle manipulates it, is always something of the future, charting new, unexpected destinies.

This intense, critical, playful relation to words places Nicholas Royle in good company, between Derrida and Cixous and a great genealogy of English-language writers, starting with Shakespeare, of whom, by the way, he offers a series of brilliant, often jaw-dropping readings here. Yet Royle has his own word theatre, his own plays, his own way of 'playing' (with) words: at times disarmingly unguarded, it is never gratuitous, or rather: it is free, and for free, but always reflecting, accompanying or anticipating a work of thinking. He plays words

out like a fixed set of possibilities in a closed system of rules (with a dictionary rulebook always at hand), but also like the line of a kite or a fishing rod, and yet this playing out, this unwinding of a yarn, is not opposed in Royle's hands to its other, the winding in, the knotting or weaving, the ravelling of the writing.

So if this book were a house or a garden or even a burrow with its galleries, here's the warning I'd hang at the entrance: tread lightly here, do not assume you know in advance what any one word means or does, be ready to learn it anew, prepare to be unprepared, be sure to take things at face value, with its eyes, its ears, the back of its mind; any signs of innocence you may find here, in particular, are indeed innocent, but they are also something else: if not calculated or calculating, they are wise to some other thinking and linking, some other mode of transport between texts and words and ideas.

This book is not only an excellent introduction to Hélène Cixous's work and a brilliant exploration and analysis of its extraordinary powers and subtleties: it has tangled (itself) so inextricably with Cixous's writing that it is a henceforth indispensable add-on to it, a new tendril or eddy of the oeuvre, an unforeseen branch on the other side: on the other side of the book or the page, on the other side of language, of the channel and the body, so different yet so intimately entangled that it's hard at times to tell where the reading stops and the writing begins. But what is most striking, and ultimately inexplicable – inexplicable in the way certain poetic effects can resist every critical onslaught – is that this book enters into what I can only call a telepathic relation with Hélène Cixous's writing: the book is all about reading, of course, it's a performative runaway exposé on reading, but in the process it's as if this happily unhinged free-wheeling meticulous reading, which operates necessarily from afar, somehow has a direct link into the heart of the text it is reading, from one mind to another, from one writer to another, from one writing to another and from one language to another.

It's a question of translation, but one that can take an antagonistic turn, for example in the great debate, to put it politely, between Birds and Cats. By approaching Cixous's vast multifarious chimerical body of work from the point of view of a bird, Royle's book charts an unusual, an unexpected trajectory – at least if we are to judge by the most obvious, measurable surface of Hélène Cixous's oeuvre (incalculably more fur than feathers) and its critical response (innumerable references to Cixous's cats, particularly from *Messie* (1996) on, let's say; relatively little about her birds). This already says something important about Nicholas Royle's project: it opens a new reading-perspective on Cixous's

writing. But there's more here than this. For one thing, to perch himself and his critical interpretative apparatus so resolutely among the birds is to take sides in what certainly appears like an irreconcilable dispute, not to say a battle to the death: it seems there is no sublation possible between cats and birds, and this is perhaps reflected in the fact that the one place in Cixous's oeuvre where there is an explicit, carnal, deadly, perhaps death-defying cat-bird encounter, the short text 'Shared at Dawn', is only referred to in passing here, at the very end of the book (p. 218).

You're either on one side or the other, and Nicholas Royle has very decisively chosen the B side over the C. He has taken up his position on the 'other' side, in any case the side less well recognised in the reception thus far of Hélène Cixous's work. Now it must be said that 1) there are lots of sides to Hélène Cixous: this is a constitutional fact that's also a kind of paradox: many sides implies the necessity of taking sides, which is to say that there's no happy synthesis of the one/many relation; and 2) Nicholas Royle demonstrates beyond any possible doubt that the B-side is fully one of Cixous's sides, indeed that she writes about and with birds all the time. What's more 3) it says something about Royle's approach: not that he's off to one side, as if there were some more 'proper' or 'central' angle on Cixous's work, but there's a way that he's on his own here, that he does his own thing: rather than taking up a position within a pre-defined field of Cixous Studies, he builds his own nest before our eyes, twig by twig; 4) this is all, also, again, a question of translation...

Because one of the most surprising, and ultimately uncanny things about this book is that it proposes a complex, intimate, passionate reading of Hélène Cixous *in English translation*. The book reflects on and even theorises this reading decision: indeed it turns this decision, which might seem to signal a weakness, into a remarkable advantage, a powerful argument in its own favour by reading Cixous from the point of view of English, and as a writer who is so forceful that her writing – always in French, adoringly, uproariously – has also, irreversibly, changed the English language. This is an extraordinary, strong and daring critical position, given that pretty much the first rule in the received initial conditions of critical engagement with the Cixous oeuvre is that it must be read 'in French', that it is so committed to and constituted by its engagement with French, so consubstantial with it, that translations can only be used as rough guides, and thus that one can only really tangle with it in the original French. Now it's true that this book makes clear that Nicholas Royle reads French, reads Hélène Cixous in French (at one point he is described reading 'painfully slowly' with a 'dictionary on the

side' – though the book also makes clear that he never reads or writes English without several dictionaries on the side!) and he often comments on and modifies the translations he uses. However, that's rather to miss the point, that is, that he comes out publicly here with the blunt frontal claim to show how 'Cixous in translation' will transform both 'literature in English' and 'English as a language', and that he will 'explore the inventiveness of her work through the rich and strange resources of English itself' (p. 2). This is completely new in Cixousology: it is a bold claim that Royle genuinely delivers on – in his own very singular way. The Cixous in this book is a particular Cixous, one seen not only through an English lens, but almost more importantly – though in the end the two things are inseparable here – through a Nicholas-Royle-autobiographical and -autofictional lens, weaving his account of her texts with his account of his encounters with her texts, and with his accounts of a great number of other (English) texts, and his accounts of his encounters with Hélène Cixous 'in person' – and yet this Royle Cixous is beguilingly true, true to Cixous, truer to her writing and her life-force than any supposedly objective prosodic critical treatment could ever be.

This book is required reading for anyone interested in Hélène Cixous, in the many things and texts and people that name names, the many species, even, for anyone interested in words or poetry or literature, in thinking and writing – and in Nicholas Royle's remarkable, original, illuminating and uplifting flight path through all these word-beings and more.