

Terrible but Unfinished: Stories of History*

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I WAS HOPING TO DO SOMETHING IMPOSSIBLE, something, I would say, more important than anything for me, but important as impossible, something as impossible as important and therefore destined to succeed only in failure: this “thing” I have been hoping beyond hope to do would be to bring together in the space of a single paper the two continents, or rather the two C’s, the two seasons and what I would call the two seams of my thinking and doing: Cixous and Cambodia. It would be quite beautiful I believe, this impossible crossing, and it is not something I can bear to abandon outright. But rest assured, I will not actually achieve it here, there is no totalizing synthesis on the horizon of this paper and thus no end to history in sight. And I suppose it’s better this way.

I want to think here about the great question of tragedy, and about one tragedy in particular—which is immediately more than one. Two tragedies at least: because tragedy, the word *tragedy*, means both a theatrical form, a play of a certain kind in a certain tradition, associated with the institution and the space of the theater, and an event or a series of events in the “real” world. I am not talking about the relation between the stage of the unconscious and the stage of history, to quote the title of a well known essay by Hélène Cixous, but about the two stages of history if you will: the stage of the history play and the stage of history, what is called history, beyond or shy of the theater. This situation is compounded or underlined by a problem of translation here, because the word *histoire* in French means both story and history. I will consider two plays by Cixous which have the word *histoire* in their title: *L’histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, roi du Cambodge* (The Terrible but Unfinished Story/History of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia)

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and *L'histoire (qu'on ne connaîtra jamais)* (The Story/History (which we will never know)),¹ two plays which are at once real and fictive, and which address this question of relations between fiction and reality, between story and history or between two meanings of tragedy.

L'histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, roi du Cambodge, the first play written by Cixous for the Théâtre du Soleil, opened in Paris in 1985. The terrible but unfinished story: the story of the history is "terrible," genocidal, tragic, *but* it is "unfinished." In a certain, common, sense, this is a contradiction in terms or an oxymoron: a terrible history, in other words, a tragedy, can only be finished. One might think that this is precisely what is terrible about the tragedy. It could even be taken to be the very definition of tragedy as terrible history: a tragedy is essentially eschatological, to begin with it is finished, it careens towards an end that is already there at the outset, it is doomed to achieve a predestined finish. Such is (the) tragedy: there is no escape, not even any ambiguity or uncertainty; the future is written in advance, it is necessity, and this future is necessarily the end, which is to say death.

So this title, *The Terrible but Unfinished Story . . .*, already suggests a certain figure of the impossible, a finish that is not finished, a reckless and mad hope in the face of implacable necessity. The contradiction that the "but" represents, between "Terrible" and "Unfinished," is perhaps a necessary contradiction, perhaps it is precisely the certainty of the end that opens the uncertain incalculable space of the aftermath. Is one ever finished with the finish? Can we and even should we be finished with it? Perhaps what begins after the end, and precisely because it is too late, will somehow mitigate the terror that it can never erase, or represent some form of belated and powerless justice.

To stage the *histoire* of our times has always been the more or less explicit project of the Théâtre du Soleil. This necessarily implies a sort of *mise en abyme*, a self-reflexive aporia whereby the doing and the recounting cannot be disentangled. Such a theatrical project, as it is inscribed in this title, *L'histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk . . .*, plays on the abyss or the well or the goldmine of the duplicitous French word *histoire*: between fiction and non-fiction, between art and reality, representation and truth, between repetition or rehearsal and invention, between inflexible preestablished fate and the possibility of performative intervention in the course of events, between the political and the personal. Let me say from the outset that this undecidable bivalence of the word *histoire*, which therefore characterizes in an essential way the stage on which this *history play* unfolds, can also be seen to inform the other stage or the other scene that is the tribunal—to which I shall return in a moment.

But what is it, this *histoire terrible*, that remains unfinished? Is the title talking about the play itself? Is this a historical play yet to be finished, a work in progress on the subject of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia? Or is it rather the *subject* of the play which remains unfinished? Does the *histoire* of the title refer to Norodom Sihanouk himself, his history, his life? As we watch the play, are we going to be watching the unfinished life of this still very much alive historical figure? This last reading of the title suggests that the challenge taken up by Cixous with this play would be to recount history as life in the living. To live history *sur le vif* in writing it, in the writing of it. And this of course brings us back to the first reading of our wrenching title: a play *sur le vif*, *L'histoire terrible* must itself remain unfinished as it enacts history in its very unfolding.

L'histoire terrible was written only a few years after the Khmer Rouge genocide. More than ten years later, the Cambodian government and the United Nations entered into negotiations for the staging of an international trial of the Khmer Rouge. On the imagined international stage, the perpetrators of genocide would be brought to justice before the packed house of humanity. What, I would like to ask, is the relationship between the world and the stage? If the theater is the world in small, the tiny kingdom of Cambodia took on epic dimensions in *Sihanouk*. The play engages what Cixous has called a "poethics": it is an act of witnessing and of memory, it takes a stand here and now as history is being made, yet it is political only insofar as it is poetical. Realism is a "curse" for theater, as Cixous says,² and so taking "Cambodia" to be Cambodia, which is what I risk doing here, may itself be a fatal misreading. Even where the theater is an art in, or of, *real time*. But can the theater be taken into the world?

In February 2002, with the United Nations objecting to eleven points in Cambodia's recently promulgated *Law on the Establishment of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia for the Prosecution of Crimes Committed during the Period of Democratic Kampuchea*,³ negotiations for the international tribunal broke down, to be renewed again some six months later following reconfiguration of the UN position. June 2003 finally saw the signing of an *Agreement between the United Nations and the Royal Government of Cambodia Concerning the Prosecution under Cambodian Law of Crimes Committed during the Period of Democratic Kampuchea*. Approval of the *Agreement* by Cambodia's National Assembly was, however, delayed. Contested elections in July 2003 led to an internal governmental stalemate as the opposition refused to join with the majority Cambodian People's Party, led by Prime Minister Hun Sen, to form a coalition government. The internal stalemate obstructing approval of the international *Agreement* was finally broken through the mediation of

King Sihanouk. The King staged a dramatic meeting at the Royal Palace on November 5, before which he warned the concerned Party leaders that if they did not reach an accord then and there, they would all be “condemned by History.”⁴ “If you cannot (work together) you have to take responsibility before the people and the nation,”⁵ he recalled four days later, at celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of Cambodian Independence from France—which of course this ever-returning Monarch had also brokered. More than one year later, on October 5, 2004, after a series of political compromises and maneuverings including amendments made to the *Law on the Establishment of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia . . .*, Cambodia’s National Assembly approved the *Agreement*. Nine days later, King Sihanouk abdicated in favor of his son, Norodom Sihamoni, the *prince-artiste* as he was repeatedly named in the French press at the time. Ratification of the *Agreement* soon followed, which inaugurated in earnest the ongoing collection of the Extraordinary Chambers’ budget, set at 56.3 million U.S. dollars.⁶ Hanging as we still are in this uneasy balance between the Cambodian government and the UN, I want to explore the potentiality of staging *L’histoire* in Cambodia.

By the potentiality of staging, I mean of course the real possibility of translating *L’histoire terrible* into Khmer in view of a production in Cambodia. And I mean the real possibility of an international tribunal in Cambodia for crimes against humanity. But here, with this paper, I will begin small, in the hopes of better approaching, if not anticipating, much less predicting, the coming of such historical events. As a prelude, then, to a larger study, and to further action, that is acting, I would like today to take up these questions first in a somewhat oblique manner, through a reading of Cixous’s other play titled *L’histoire, The Story/History (which we will never know)*. I will then return to *The Terrible but Unfinished Story*, and to Cambodia herself. After years of working on and in Cambodia, I am finally, if abashedly, bringing myself to publicly address the tragedy or tragedies which first incited and continue in more or less clandestine ways to sustain my engagement in “Khmer Studies.” I mean Cixous’s play and the Khmer Rouge genocide. I find that I can only address the tragedy in its double manifestation, at once as historical event and as theatrical representation, and, further, that to apprehend articulations between these two I must begin with reading. Notably, here, first, through the reading of an altogether different tragedy. I am tempted to see this approach through an explicitly personal therapeutic lens, and in a mimetic relation to a certain indirectness I see to be generally characteristic of Cambodian culture. With the two stages of history which will occupy us here, we will in fact never stray far from questions of healing, insofar as healing is indissociable from staging, and

from what we might call an aesthetic practice of the oblique (be it in a transcultural act of staging). These reflections are haunted by questions concerning what Cixous has called the “political gesture” of reading:⁷ having returned from the field, how can reading make, as we say, a *différence*? This double take on tragedy, reading a story of history and the history of a story between two plays, imposed itself upon me: like another demonstration of tragedy itself, played out between the singular unspeakable, indescribable event and its *répétition*, that is, its rehearsal, its ineluctable re-play.

I

Between *L'histoire* and *L'histoire*, between *The Terrible Story/History of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia* and *The Story/History (which we will never know)*, emerges already the tragic divide. *The Terrible Story/History* is the first in a line of Cixousian-Shakespearean history plays. Grounded in formidable archival research—of which we will see only a glimpse below—the play nonetheless transposes actual history. With the theatrical appearance of a ghostly father in the place of the King father in actuality still alive, or the magical bicycle voyage of an adopted son from Phnom Penh to Beijing . . . , the play elevates the contemporary history of Cambodia to the domain of Tragedy, and in so doing brings it into our everyday lives. We need only compare the two titles to understand that *The Story/History (which we will never know)*, published in 1994, eight years after *The Terrible Story*, is not *not* of this spectacular line. Yet, written for director Daniel Mesguich and so, in an immediate sense at least, outside the framework of the Théâtre du Soleil's particular contemporary political engagement, *The Story/History (which we will never know)* plays explicitly on the tradition of the History play. The singular historical character of the play is Snorri Sturluson, author/compiler of the Icelandic incarnations of Norse mythology known as the *Prose Eddas*; rather than recounting the tales themselves, the play recounts a tale of the tales' writing, in which the writer Snorri plays a central role. Though the history is already written according, in this instance, to one definition of tragedy I have given above, though the tapestry is already woven according to another writer, the great-grandmother ancient Icelandic incarnation of Poetics, Edda, though the end is already destined to come . . . , in Cixous's tale, the author Snorri intervenes in the story he recounts. The engagement of the author—and here I mean, also, our author Cixous—in unearthing the history of this story is no less formidable than that accomplished for the Cambodia play. As if a certain realism distanced in the one, to better represent history,

perhaps, were to resurface in the other, but in the form of a *story*, in deconstructing the very formation of the story, such that within and between the two plays *L'histoire* maintains its bivalency, while yet defying any polarization, that is hierarchization, between history and story.

Before looking a bit more closely at the multiple authorial roles in this staging of relations between “reality” and “fiction,” and in support of my argument here, let me begin again with the end, the terrible end which remains open-ended. This is Cixous-Edda-and-Snorri’s final exchange at the end of *The Story/History* (*which we will never know*), at the tail end, after the tragic deaths of the hero Sigfried and the author Snorri:

Edda:

. . . And no one to recount how
Everything began, everything finished, entirely otherwise than in
My old tapestry?

Snorri:

No one will ever recount our story/history.

Edda:

It’s a tragedy
(*HQ* 184)

This is another story of tragedy, slightly different from that with which we have begun, in which a Terrible History can only be finished, in which the future, which is to say death, is written in advance. And where the “but Unfinished” of our first title would come like a savior from another realm to challenge tragedy in its seemingly indomitable drive to the end. The definition of tragedy our authors end with here has as much to do with the event (of death) as with its telling: the tragedy lies not in the terrible end of the event recounted but in the terrible open-endedness of what is not recounted; the tragedy lies in its own aftermath, when no one remains to tell the story. In this reading, the “but unfinished” would be the crux of Cixousian tragedy, rather than its end.

Ancient Edda finishes by conceding that something remains outside the warp and the weft of her age-old terrible History—the telling itself. Even though the telling she glimpses figures only as an *impossibility*; remember: there remains no one to recount the story of the other story. This final authorial exchange brings us into another dimension of the holocaust after which there remains no one to witness for the witness. Edda does not simply lament that no one remains to tell the story, but rather that no one remains to tell a story *other* than that of the pre-woven tragic end, that is the story of the writer writing and which the writer writes in bloody combat with the terrible force of tragedy. And it is in

this telling of the very impossibility of telling (something new), it is in this impossible telling that another History is woven. The story ends in tragedy, but, like *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia*, which ends, if we may say so, with an alternate final Act, *The Story/History (which we will never know)* remains unfinished. This play ends without the smallest mark which makes the biggest difference, without the final closure of a full stop signaling to the reader that all is over now, we can close the book on this one, leave the theater for the comfort of our homes. There is no full stop to literature to allow us to re-enter what in neat opposition would be called life. Endless, Edda's last line "It's a tragedy" leaves the reader hanging, in this abyss of writing in which neither hope nor despair are banished: because here we are reading the story of the story which can never be told. This (un)ending gives us one clue to reading the play's mysteriously paradoxical title, which invites us to read something which we cannot read, at least something we cannot know, the *Histoire* which will never be known.

On several occasions prior to this ending we have seen the author intervene to revive the apparently finished story; or we might better attribute this very authorial gesture to the story intervening to revive the murdered author. Which is to say that *The Story's* unending ending has been well rehearsed. A few pages before the end, Snorri has barely died when Edda, long dead, exhorts him to rush to heaven in order to keep the gods from re-weaving the tragedy with the thread of vengeance.

(He [Snorri] dies)

(Enter Edda)

Edda:

He has just died

He is worn out! Too bad!

Psst! Snorri Sturlusson! I beg of you!

Don't delay! Hurry up.

If you only knew what they are conspiring Up There! The worst!

Everything in my tapestry, the old one,

The one which I sacrificed to you, they are re-weaving it!

Sigfried is encircled. Alone I can't resist the crowds.

Won't you help me?

Snorri:

Dressed in dust, I'm to exit the stage?

And without ceremony?

Edda:

Later, later.

It is a question of all the times of future time [Il y va de tous les temps du temps futur]

(*HQ* 172)

At Edda's incitation, the impossible happens: even passed away, the author intervenes to change the course of history. Does the author not always remain after death? Not to rewrite the past, but to write the future. The complicity of the doing and the recounting, which we encountered earlier in the bold contemporary act of *staging* the *histoire* of our times, appears here in the very act of *writing*, that is writing's very act which continues well after the death of the author.

"*Je suis nombreuses quand j'écris*," "I am many when I write," Cixous said in a 2003 radio interview on her book *Rêve, je te dis*.⁸ In the following, I want to briefly explore this Cixousian writerly multiplicity from the vantage point first of *The Story/History* (*which we will never know*), and in view of considering the notion of the author herself—of a play for example, or of a crime.

If the figure of Writing in the process of writing appears to be the main character of so much of Cixous's work, it or she or he is often seconded by that of the writer in the process of writing. This is to say that although the authorial instance, what we call "Cixous" in the book, the narrator, the character that stands in for the author, does not play a role in *The Story* as she often does in her fiction, she does, it seems to me, appear in numerous other incarnations of the Writing or the writer writing (in) *The Story*.

The play opens with the Gods looking down from above for the poet Snorri Sturlusson. They spot him, catch him, and call him before their Council of the Divine and the Dead. Snorri first resists then cedes to their authority, as they command him to assume his responsibility as a poet. The divine command denies Snorri his own authorial authority, while nonetheless awakening him to it. The more he engages in the pursuit of divine will, the more he resists it. Well into the story he follows and in which he plays, Snorri refuses his dead father's persistent call for blood:

Well, you will tell your masters [the gods] that I am preparing a surprise for them. This will be a story of love. No blood, no hatred, no torture.

I promise them alliance, reconciliation, longevity.

Add that I will never serve. I am free, I obey no one. (HQ 81)

. . .

Out! I give to no one, neither god, nor the dead, the right to command my pen . . . !

(HQ 82)

This struggle between the Gods-as-Director and the Poet-as-Actor gains in intensity over the course of *The Story*. At the rumble of the Dice rolled

in the Heavens, Edda and Snorri race into action to keep destiny from catching them all (*HQ* 152). Pages later the gods are reveling in mourning the dead Sigfried rejoining them above, and so in the tragic victory of their masterful staging. Yet even as they command we see them commanded by their actors. Murdered, Sigfried laments his continuing torture:

It's terrible to be only a bone in Hagen's jaws.
 No one can imagine it. Look!
 You don't see him gnawing me? (*HQ* 168)

As in the opening scene, the Gods look down from above in search of the actors; with their theatrical lights they spot the actors, who then enter, as on cue:

Small Very High:
 Oh yes. I see him!
Equal to Very High:
 Where?
Small Very High:
 Over here! Lights!
 (Enter Gunther, and his brothers, Hagen, Volker)
 (*HQ* 168)

Snorri finds support in assuming the responsibility of the poet as he sees it in the person of Barout the Jew. Barout (bar-out, barred out, the only able-bodied man left in the city, the only person not recruited in preparations for the festivities, rejected even by the cooks) is brought in from the outside: of the story by Cixous (what is a Jew doing in the Eddas? What is Cixous doing in the Eddas?), but also of the chateau at the behest of the court seamstresses. The pure invention of Cixous, (and a reinvention of Cixous in six letters) Barout helps with the sewing of the Queen's new gown, and with the weaving of Snorri's new story. The Poets call on the Jew in their struggle against Edda's fate, her apparent fate to bear fate:

Snorri:
 Then, grand-mother, stop discouraging us
 Nothing is decided. The bad yesteryears have passed.
 It's up to us to gallop tomorrow on the right side [*du bon côté*].
Edda:
 Good! Take my tapestry, cut the threads,
 Destroy it, begin again at zero. Make as if
 memory did not exist!

Snorri:

That's what I want to do

Rabbi, do you want to help me begin the world anew?

Barout:

God willing.

(*HQ* 115–16)

Calling on the Jew, the Poets call on God, subverting again Snorri's authorial independence.

Who, then, kills the Jew? A legal court would surely inculcate Snorri. But was Snorri responsible for his own act? "*Je me suis trompé! Je me suis trompé!*" (148) (I was mistaken! I was mistaken!), he exclaims with the French reflexive verbal form exposing the mistake as a division in his own self; we might translate: "I mistook myself! *He* overtook *himself*." Barout dies, and Snorri opens a monologue that is a dialogue with himself :

How was I able to strike? Where did the anger come from? the knife?
It's not my fault! I can't do such a thing! No! It's my father! Ah! How horrible!

These hands killed a man?

No. It's me. Me, Snorri Sturlusson, author of the *Eddas*, with my own hands, as if I were a violent man [un homme de sang]! The blood came out of my books and inundated my own life!

I struck myself! It's not just! It wasn't foreseen! (*HQ* 148)

Does the blood on Snorri's hands represent his father's victory and Snorri's own defeat at the hands of destiny? In other words, is it the writing foreordained by the gods which overcame him? As Barout is struck, so is Snorri. And so is Cixous. The author of *The Story* has spoken frequently of the way in which she was physically fatefully struck by the unforeseen violence of this passage. Struck, as if it was not, yet was the Poet's fault:

For *L'histoire* I was following an adventure as it was happening, I did not at all have the feeling that I was inventing it; I was a spectator and the adventure was that Snorri was leaving, I was listening to what he was saying, then he was coming back because someone had stolen his manuscripts, and in a flash he threw himself onto Barout and killed him. I came down trembling, I was beside myself, seized with disgust. It was monstrous. I take the papers, which is to say I take the murder and I throw it in the wastebasket: and I try to forget. Here's the author intervening: I refuse consciously, I tell myself there is no question of this, it's absurd. It was only the next day that I questioned the event, my reaction, and then I said to myself: who threw the papers in the wastebasket? I don't know who. Obviously a super-ego. Then I thought : if Snorri killed Barout, I should

not interfere: it's repressive. I add that *during that time* I did not for a second think: but Snorri it's you and Barout it's you. These were two characters whom I loved deeply and I couldn't stand them tearing themselves apart. I quickly rewrote this episode, asking: and now, what are they going to do? What do you do when you have killed someone you don't want to kill?⁹

Enter Edda to save the Poet.

Snorri:

You don't understand that Barout killed Snorri? I will die of this. I am forever sad.

Edda:

Maybe. But for the moment take care of the living. While you are crying over yourself the great wheel continues to turn. (HQ 149)

For Edda has changed her ways, in some way. Edda has always made a comeback. She has always been the incarnation of Memory. But her persistence is now directed towards rewriting the old story. Towards remembering not to forget about those who suffered *and* those who will suffer. Edda is a reminder of the Erinyes, she is the reminder par excellence—but who in this new incarnation seeks not vengeance but rather its end. Her first two appearances in the book are after everyone else has exited. “Who is calling me? No one? No one. Too bad” (HQ 32). And a bit later: “Someone called me? No? / Me, looking for me so far away / While I am so close! / Too bad. I will come back” (HQ 70). And she does. After her own death, she comes back to incite Snorri after his:

Edda:

He has just died

He is worn out! Too bad!

Psst! Snorri Sturlusson! I beg of you!

Don't delay! Hurry up. (HQ 172)

As I noted earlier, Edda has the last word of the play, after the tragedy ends. Once again she is too late. Edda is what begins after the end, and precisely because she is forever too late, promises somehow to mitigate the terror that she can never erase.

II

In the following I will look at the opening of *L'histoire terrible . . .*, the play and the story, where the staging itself is what is staged. And where the limits and the promise of justice meet (those of) the theater.

As an aside before we begin, let me say that we could make a case, one day, for what we are reading here to serve as testimony in a trial for genocide. The first half of the play, the First Epoch, recounts the events leading up to Sihanouk's "decision"—if it was a decision—to join the Khmer Rouge. Can we consider him responsible, as Head of State? Or was his role controlled by some invisible director? Was Sihanouk directing his own troupes, or was he a marionette? In this paper I will look only at the beginning of the story, with Sihanouk apparently staging his own act, in a sort of one-man show as writer, director, and actor. A proper judge would be obliged to consider the rest, where Sihanouk seems at least to be pulling fewer strings. Making our way through the complex of responsibility, it should however become clear that one is not so easily distinguishable from the other, the puppet from the puppeteer. If Sihanouk's theatrics have long attracted the attention of Cambodia-watchers, typically inspiring one or the other extreme reaction: scorn or admiration, analyses tend to appeal to a clear distinction between fiction and reality, in which schema Sihanouk's artistic disposition stands in contradiction to genuine political engagement. Insofar as *L'histoire terrible . . .* plays, quite seriously, on the inextricability of theater and politics, it invites other readings, of vital importance in rendering history, if not, perhaps, justice.

The play opens with Sihanouk presiding over a popular audience, a tribunal of sorts where the King plays the role of judge and jury and directly hears the grievances of the common people—as Sihanouk puts it, this first scene represents a “Hall of Justice for those who can't write French.” Of course Sihanouk—or is it Cixous?—proclaims this here in French: *Ici c'est la Cour de Justice pour ceux qui ne savent pas écrire le français* (*HT* 1.1.23). The phrase performs at once a disjunction and a conjunction between the author and the King of the People's Court, between the play or the theater and the *Cour de Justice*. The line is addressed to the young Khmer Rouge in Sihanouk's audience: “This is the Hall of Justice for those who can't write French,” he yells at Khieu Samphan who declares he has returned from France with a Ph.D. in economics. “Go,” Sihanouk continues, “go back to where you came from, to the Latin Quarter, to Hanoi, to Beijing!” (*HT* 1.1.23). The phrase is addressed to Khieu Samphan, yet we too are admitted into the theater and so dismissed in a word, we others in the audience who read French. International observers of this quasi-legal staged Cambodian court, we are called to witness; yet we are called false witnesses as we are simultaneously *excluded* from the audience, along with the Khmer Rouge for our literacy and higher degrees. We are no longer simply in the audience, blending with the crowd; instead, made conscious that the language we thought we understood is speaking another language in

this play, we are brought to see ourselves in the audience before the stage, and on stage, rejected from that stage by the King. In the image of Sihanouk, Cixous too is staging a popular tribunal. She hears the King of course, but also the various choruses on-and offstage, audiences at large, in and out of the theater.

Cambodia's famed cinematographer King is indeed a master of *mise en scène*, he is an insuperable "stager" of history—and indeed history as *his* story.¹⁰ And here it is doubly his: a story that is his to tell, and which tells the story of his life. In Scene 2 the King lays out his plot-line to his spectral father:¹¹

I will be without precedent: the man who exchanged his throne for a seat in Parliament. He who trades the silence of Majesty for the thunder of the Loud Speaker is greater than the king (*HT* 1.2.23)

Sihanouk's abdication is a stunning *coup de théâtre*, by which the king comes to play the leading role as *tribun*, what I've translated here as Loud Speaker, the great orator who stirs the crowds. And it is precisely this theatrical coup which the Americans and their allies cannot stand. Rendered quasi-legal by historical evolution, Sihanouk's royal tribunal of the opening scene will re-emerge in the full modern legality of the *tribun*. The King will grow in Majesty in stepping down from the throne to step up to the Speaker's platform. Yet the Americans complain that Sihanouk has not changed: he will only be *playing* someone else, though of course this is entirely in character. In the staging, Sihanouk celebrates the abyssal bivalence of his own *histoire*, and the Americans are had. Echoing Cixous/Sihanouk's inaugural admission-dismissal of those who read French, the King's virtuosic abdication reduces other vying actors to the role of spectator. Frustrated, exasperated before the spectacle of the King, the U.S. Ambassador asks his ally, Sihanouk's rival: "And you, Prince Sirik Matak, do all these dramatics [*toute cette mise en scène*] please you?" (*HT* 1.3.37).

Sihanouk's capacity to play himself and to play others, to *direct* others, dazzles. In act 2, Sihanouk will again stun the world in breaking off relations with the United States. This political coup is operated by a theatrical tour de force—a rhetorical performance in which Sihanouk stages a minitrial of American crimes against Cambodia. Before the spectacle of the King deconstructing the American Ambassador's disingenuous discourse, two future Khmer Rouge onlookers in the onstage audience we in turn are watching exclaim:

Hou Youn:

You have to admit he has prodigious talent! I'm delighted!

Khieu Samphan: The acrobat and the onlooker, it's beautiful! [Le bateleur et le badaud, c'est du beau] (*HT* 2.1.59)

Sihanouk has just given a magnificent close reading, where the writer's characteristic skill is that of a magician: voilà, he shows us, what is there in front of our eyes, on the page on the stage. The reading brings into existence what is there—the truth—yet there is no substance to it. Truth's proof is purely rhetorical. The exchange is between the American Ambassador and the elected King:

McClintock:

Doesn't our government give to your little country an aid that gets bigger day by day?

Sihanouk:

Aha! Now I've caught you in the act, Mr. Ambassador! You heard it, Gentlemen! He said *little!* Little! You say it isn't a crime to say *little?* Then I'll answer you: it's a sign of malevolence, a mark of contempt, and evidence of a conspiracy, and I'm going to prove it! (*HT* 2.1.56)

Sihanouk catches the Ambassador with one tiny word: little. The crime is rhetorical, but none the less heinous for it. *Little* takes on enormous dimensions in Sihanouk's reading—this single word in the Ambassador's mouth will serve as evidence of an international conspiracy: *little!* Little! Sihanouk *reads* the Ambassador's words: the bigger the American aid, the smaller Cambodia becomes. Sihanouk's repetition of the little word renders its enormity. And like a writer, Sihanouk puts words into the Americans' mouths. "You say it isn't a crime to say *little?*" he says, in anticipation of the defense and to prepare his rebuttal. Sihanouk's proof follows:

Sihanouk:

. . . Couldn't you accord us the same treatment as countries much smaller than ours and which you respect? Do you say little Belgium? Tiny Israel? You reserve contempt for Cambodia alone and foreordain its disappearance. You're systematically shrinking us. Why, just look at the newspapers. First Cambodia is little, then it is very little, the next day I read that it is extremely little, now it's miniscule, a pocket kingdom, a useless remnant, an eleventh toe, it's a speck of dust in your eye, a scab,¹² it's nothing! Where is it? It's going to disappear. It has disappeared!

. . .

That's what would happen if I let you have your way. Isn't it, Gentlemen?

But I am here, Sihanouk is here, Cambodia exists! We are here, at the tip of great Asia. You see? here! The spearhead of neutrality, the

white standard, neither blue nor red; the glorious haven of all manner of pride, *this other Eden*,¹³ this demi-paradise, it is us, *this happy breed of men, this little world, this blessed plot*, this fortress Nature built herself against the contagion of the world and the arm of war, this ANGKOR, it is us! (*HT* 2.1.57)

From the newspaper to the *royaume de poche*, the pocket kingdom, Sihanouk reads aloud, that is, he performs Cambodia's disappearance. But then it is this very discursive performance which constitutes Sihanouk's and Cambodia's greatness. In Sihanouk's staging of himself, the kingdom is Shakespearean tragic rather than paperback trash. The little returns in Sihanouk's mouth transformed. Cambodia is not a little country but a little world: it is the stage, the plot—the small is the large. Playing Richard II, Sihanouk brings Cambodia out of French into English and into its "own," so to speak. The juxtaposition between French and English here, the native and the foreign, between the political and the poetic, between Sihanouk and Shakespeare, is what operates theatrically to exemplify the small-that-is-large, a working concept vital to Cixous's life writing, as I will discuss further below. In capitals in the text, ANGKOR is the capital personified—the proper name of the ancient city meaning Capital itself. And so in this new rendition which is yet so old, the tiny Kingdom of Cambodia takes on epic dimensions.

Sihanouk is at once actor and director, staged and staging; inside and outside of character he proclaims: I am here, Sihanouk is here (Mais je suis là, Sihanouk est là . . .) He is the first and the third person—and this tour de force, this dramatic *presentation* of Sihanouk, whereby he both affirms and verifies his presence as an obstacle to the Americans' designs on Southeast Asia, serves to exemplify, and thus prove, the real resistant presence of Cambodia. History is made, performatively. This realization of the country in the person of the king, of the large in the small, makes a melancholy reappearance in act 4. A coup has been staged in Phnom Penh to depose Sihanouk while he is abroad. So Sihanouk has just lost Cambodia, and is literally landless, flying from Moscow to Beijing. We see him so to speak *offstage* here, out of the public eye, "being himself" with his wife. Dejected, on the verge of losing himself, Sihanouk cries to his Queen:

And now how can I forget the great dream which became myself . . . I can no longer stop being Cambodia. I have myself become these rivers, these ricefields, these mountains, and all these peasants who populate me. (*HT* 4.4.157)

Sihanouk is divided, or rather incommensurate with himself, his same self only insofar as he is one with Cambodia. Only insofar as he

substitutes for Cambodia. But if we take “Cambodia” to be Cambodia here, that is, if we take Sihanouk to be Cambodia, we must also, at the same time, take him or her to be Cixous.

In an interview about the history of her engagement as a playwright, Cixous speaks of the small-for-the-large at the origins of her work with the Théâtre du Soleil:

The first lesson I learned at that time was the small for the large. It is clearly a question of image: just as England saw itself in Shakespeare’s time as the greatest kingdom in the world . . . , Cambodia could see itself as an immense kingdom even if it was very small. And from there we could have taken any other kingdom, we could have turned to Tibet: any small large kingdom. I understood something about the imaginary dimension that reigns at the theatre And so I set off on that path. I began to write in a way that was instilled with my epic memory from Shakespeare. And this gave *Sihanouk*.

the small-large is so important that in *Sihanouk* I am constantly talking about the small and the large. This is my way of inscribing things in the text, both in fiction and in theatre: when I begin to understand the genealogical and genetic roots of a work they also become a subject of the work itself. Which is to say that there is a reflexivity that I inscribe in the text. So in *Sihanouk* there are reflections on the small and the large just as there are reflections on Shakespeare: these are signatures, genealogical traces. It is a derived form of what could be called intertextuality. It is not intertextual but it’s a way of reminding myself and whoever can perceive it that this is a work of theatre or a work of art; it is not something realistic. The genealogy has its sources in the history, in the real events that it formalises, that it transfigures, and also in the other world which is the world of literary creation. There are always two worlds. There is the political world and the literary world, and I cross-pollinate them.¹⁴

Another take on Cixous’s sources suggests the complexity of the authorial roles we have only begun to explore here, for in the small-large-pocket-kingdom passage cited above Cixous is drawing at once from Shakespeare and from Sihanouk “himself.” Here is a telling excerpt from a remarkable interview with Sihanouk in the American magazine *Look*, dated April 2, 1968:

Interviewer:

I gather from our talk so far that you don’t especially like Americans.

Sihanouk:

I like some Americans—like Senator Mansfeld, who understands what I am up against. And Jacqueline Kennedy is adorable, and her husband was charming. Frankly, though, I think your press has a lot to do with my negative attitude about America. They always talk about “tiny” Cambodia—“the pocket kingdom.” They never say “tiny”

Belgium, which is smaller, and what about that so-called country of Grace Kelly's? It's racism. Those little European countries are white, and we are yellow and "backward." I hate this sort of contempt. It's intolerable. Why not just say "Cambodia"?¹⁵

Cixous says "In *Sihanouk*, I am constantly talking about the small and the large." In *Sihanouk* means in the play, of course, but also and indissociably, in the character of Sihanouk, Cixous is herself talking. *Sihanouk*, or *L'histoire* as I have been calling it here, is born of the political and the literary. *Sihanouk* itself or himself incarnates the abyss of the French *histoire*: between art and reality, representation and truth, rehearsal and intervention.

In her essay "*De la scène de l'inconscient à la scène de l'histoire*" Cixous speaks of this spectral substitution in describing her own writing path across genres, from fiction to drama. In her writing, the writer is nourished by the other in writing, by the "other writing," what she calls the flesh of the soul [*la chair de l'âme*]—of those who can write. This is a fatal limit, only those who can write leave a written corpus. But the others? Cixous writes:

After the other writing, the other thought, there are all the others and in particular those most immediately present and most difficult to reach, the peoples. And History? A terrible question [*l'Histoire? Question terrible*] which has haunted me incessantly. For a long time the question has resounded in me as the echo of a fault. I didn't feel guilty but I was or at least I was not guilty but I felt guilty, etc. I formulated my shame and then I sent it away: you write when one dies.¹⁶

Cixous is writing of the dead who guide her—the writers who left a written corpus, but also the dead peoples. They accompany the path her writing takes as it traverses the world well before it takes the path of theater. Cixous continues :

My path is accompanied by the phantoms of peoples. Along the length of my texts, they are there. At certain moments I was haunted by Vietnam, then Greece then Iran . . . My texts are full of these people who suffered, fell or picked themselves up.¹⁷

The "phantoms of people" accompany writing, there where living peoples are "more difficult to reach." But the path, or at least the path which is taken in this text, begins with me, with the *histoire* which would be "mine." Cixous continues: "Which History is mine? Of which History am I witness? How to unite History and text?" The response is far from simple. There is "Jewish History," she says, but especially "The History of

women.” And it is beginning with this History, alive and mine, that the path will be traced.

Being woman is not demonstrated, this must be felt, this must make itself felt, this enjoys itself . . .

Yes, I am woman, I am in faithful rapport with origins, with the nearby. I am mother, I am daughter, I cannot stop being woman.¹⁸

And it is with this “being,” paradoxically, with this “not-being-able-to-stop-being,” that the transformation in writing and of writing begins. Cixous is woman as Norodom Sihanouk is Cambodia. It is precisely here where identity is a question of textuality that displacement, transposition can begin. And it is here where age-old Poet Edda, she-who-can-not-stop-being, re-appears, to offer the possibility of some form of belated and powerless justice.

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NOTES

1 H el ene Cixous, *L'histoire terrible mais inachev ee de Norodom Sihanouk, roi du Cambodge*, rev. ed. (Paris: Th eatre du Soleil, 1987) (hereafter cited in text as *HT* with act, scene, and line number). English edition is *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk*, trans. Juliet Flower MacCannell, Judith Pike, Lollie Groth (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). English translations of *HT* are my own. Cixous, *L'histoire (qu'on ne conna tra jamais)* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1994) (hereafter cited in text as *HQ* by page number). This play has yet to be translated into English. All translations are my own.

2 See, for example, “On Theatre: An Interview with H el ene Cixous,” in Eric Prenowitz, ed., *Selected Plays of H el ene Cixous* (London: Routledge, 2004).

3 “Democratic Kampuchea” was the official name of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979.

4 J-Cl. Pomonti, “L'accord sur un gouvernement d'union offre une sortie de crise au Cambodge,” *Le Monde*, November 7, 2003.

5 “Cambodia marks 50 years independence,” BBC News, November 9, 2003.

6 See the website of the Royal Government of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge Trial Task Force (<http://www.cambodia.gov.kh/krt>), as well as that of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (<http://www.dccam.org>).

7 Seminar, Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris, November 8, 2003.

8 *Les mardis litt eraires*, with Pascale Casanova, *France Culture*, November 11, 2003.

9 “D ebats,” in *H el ene Cixous, crois ees d'une  uvre* (Paris: Galil ee, 2000), 460. My translation.

10 “Real-life” examples are abundant. See, in particular, the scathing critiques of the current Cambodian government penned by Sihanouk's political fictional alter-ego, Ruom Ritt, from the French *Pyr en es*, published regularly in the Royal Cabinet's widely read *Bulletin mensuel de documentation*, as well as, less frequently, in local Cambodian newspapers. The *Bulletin* is one of Sihanouk's main platforms for staging his and Cambodia's history. Besides royal medical reports and *comptes-rendus* of the royal family's diplomatic, religious, and humanitarian acts, each *Bulletin* includes clippings from past and present newspapers and magazines selected by the Sihanouk and annotated in his hand.

11 Sihanouk's father, Norodom Suramarit, figures as a returning ghost in the play. One could read this as a metaphorical representation of history: in 1955, Sihanouk abdicated his throne to his father in order to himself run in national elections. On the other hand, a reading of the real playwright's history suggests another surprising reading of the return of the spectral father/mother figure. See Prenowitz, "Le livre d'heures de la mère: d'Osnabruck à Oran. Temps, histoire, écritures dans l'œuvre d'Hélène Cixous" (Ph.D. dissertation, *Université de Paris 8*, 2001).

12 Alternatively translated "a piece of shit" [une croûte].

13 Phrases in English in the original are italicized in this translated passage.

14 "On Theatre An Interview with Hélène Cixous," 13–14.

15 Interview reproduced with contemporary annotations by the King in the Royal Cabinet's *Bulletin mensuel de documentation*, April 15–22, 2004, under the title *Réponses de Norodom Sihanouk* à "Look".

16 Cixous, "De la scène de l'inconscient à la scène de l'histoire: Chemin d'une écriture," in F. van Rossum-Guyon and M. Diaz-Diocaretz, *Hélène Cixous : Chemins d'une écriture* (Saint Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes), 26. My translation.

17 Cixous, "De la scène," 26.

18 Cixous, "De la scène," 27.