

Synaesthesia in Cixous and Barthes

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Ne vous opposez pas au monde sensoriel.¹

The term synaesthesia where a stimulus applied to one sense involuntarily elicits a response from one or more others describes both a neurological syndrome and a literary device and the two cannot be conflated unproblematically. The former pertains to concrete physical sensation and the latter, more often, to poetic notions of transferring one sense into another. Notwithstanding this distinction, the latter was elaborated from the former: as a literary device, synaesthesia describes and inscribes bodily sensation, and sensation precedes ideation. Synaesthesia is present in the writings of both Cixous and Barthes. It occurs most notably in Barthes's writing on painting and music, for example 'Cy Twombly ou *non multa sed multum*', 'Sagesse de l'art', 'Réquichot et son corps', and 'Ecoute'. It is inscribed throughout Cixous's writing and most actively in 'L'Approche de Clarice Lispector', 'La Venue à l'écriture', 'Le dernier tableau ou le portrait de dieu' and *LA*. Synaesthesia is axial in the intersecting projects of Cixous and Barthes to rehabilitate sensory perception (it can be read as a production of this project) which, in turn, is integral to a wider concern to redefine knowledge. Thus the synaesthesia in operation here is more than poetic effect. It has wider epistemological implications which are both extensive and open-ended. In this paper some of these implications will be examined through the writing of Cixous and Barthes. Therefore synaesthesia will not always be addressed directly; where it leads to and proceeds from will be of equal significance in the broader agenda of redefining knowledge and the position of sensory perception with regard to knowledge.

The synaesthetic writing of Cixous and Barthes is radically open and this openness necessarily informs the structural pattern of this essay. Moreover, it precludes arrival at any peremptory conclusions. The first section therefore

1 Tao to King quoted by Barthes in *Alors, la Chine?*, Paris, 1975, 14.

traces briefly the marginalisation of sensory perception as it took effect in the Platonic tradition. Following this, Richard Cytowic's recently published book *The Man Who Tasted Shapes* is considered as an example of how within the scientific register of neurology synaesthesia has had profound epistemological implications. Cytowic explores how synaesthesia has presented grounds for a re-conceptualisation of sense perception and how this is linked to new insight into the organisation of the brain and the formulation of knowledge. From here I proceed to an examination of the synaesthesia mobilised in the writings of Cixous and Barthes. First, Cixous's expanded use of metaphor is considered; how this kind of relation to metaphor is bound up with the body and sensory perception. This leads into an examination of her writing *from* and *through* the writings of Clarice Lispector wherein sense perception is re-mobilised and sense modalities are reinscribed. There follows a section on rhythm and a discussion of how this inherently transgressive category (in terms of the compartmentalisation of the senses) is linked to notions of the body in both writers and carries all the senses concurrently. The paper concludes with a consideration of music as a privileged idiom of signification for both Cixous and Barthes.

The marginalisation of sensorial perception

Cixous and Barthes both claim that sensorial perception has been repudiated and marginalised. This repudiation can be traced back to Platonic thought wherein all physical objects in the world were considered as basically unreal. Plato therefore situated reality in ideal forms because it would be impossible to say, for example, of the form of roundness that it is not round. A form can be named without risk of error or exception and thus it can be considered as real: it is its conceptual nature that qualifies it for reality. Sensory experience of the world in the Platonic matrix is regarded as unreal and is mediated and categorised through a reasoned form of thought. This epistemological framework is quite opposed to the ancient materialist theories which based knowing on the senses. Barthes's methodological alliances with this latter paradigm of knowledge are born out by his use of certain elements of its terminology in order both to ground and to describe his own writing: words such as *schéma* and, notably, *esthétique*. Returning to the latter's etymological root the Greek

term *aisthesis* refers to sensation and perception. Perception was initially introduced into Greek philosophy as a way of defining the physical processes involved in contact with objects. F. E. Peters notes how various explanations were proposed, mainly concerning the 'contact, mixture or penetration of the bodies involved' and that despite certain discrepancies the first major crisis in these theories only came about when:

grades of knowledge were distinguished and sense perception was separated from other more reliable types of perception that had little or nothing to do with sensible realities or sensible processes. *Aisthesis* found itself involved in the epistemological doubts raised by Heraclitus and Parmenides and debarred from any genuine access to truth.²

This change also coincided with the increasingly widespread belief in the immaterial, ideal quality of the soul, situated as the centre of life in the subject and the source of sensuous activity. Thus a new relationship between incorporeal soul and material body emerged, as Peters describes:

What had once been a simple contact between bodies was now extended to a chain of causality that began with a perceived body and its qualities, and passed, via a medium (...) a sense organ, and a sense faculty to the soul, becoming, at least for those who held the immateriality of the soul, noncorporeal at some point in the process. (*GPT*, 8-9)

Aisthesis came under increasing attack and *episteme* took precedence. Thought was exalted as a superior kind of perception and speculation was deemed to be demonstrated by experiential perception in that order. This is an order which Cixous and Barthes are engaged in strategies to invert. Moreover, their common sanctioning of the poetic over the theoretical is in line with this inversion. The poetic, in Jakobson's formulation (which was doubtless influential on both Cixous and Barthes), is constituted by the 'aesthetic signifier' and art 'affects' the subject: it touches him/her through the senses. The mobilisation of synaesthetic paradigms in the writing of both is one of the most 'affective' and thus significant of these strategies working as it does to inscribe heterogeneous sensation in language.

2 F. E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon*, New York, 1967, 8, hereafter cited in the text as *GPT*.

The Man Who Tasted Shapes: synaesthesia and neurology

As a lived condition synaesthesia has had profound implications for the neuro-scientific apparatus of analysis. Richard Cytowic's *The Man Who Tasted Shapes* may serve as a productive intertext for the reading which follows since the difficulties and conundrums synaesthesia posed for neuro-science correlate at many levels with the kind of theoretical and poetic mutations encountered in the writing of Cixous and Barthes. The neuro-scientific framework evoked here cannot serve to explain the synaesthetic productions of their writing, nor am I setting out to make some pseudo-scientific diagnosis of them as synaesthetes. These considerations of synaesthesia as a neurological condition occupy the position of a brief excursus, serving, to show some of the wider implications of synaesthetic paradigms of signification and of the revindication of a sensorial relation to the world.

The Man Who Tasted Shapes relates the author's (a neuro-scientist) exploration of synaesthesia through the experience of synaesthetes and the profoundly disturbing implications the phenomenon had for many of the most basic tenets of neuro-science. Historically, synaesthesia had been deemed unworthy of scientific attention due to its ideopathic nature. An experience that is subjective and different in each manifestation, the only means of gaining knowledge of it was through the reports of those who claimed to experience it. Its lack of external manifestations made it almost impossible to generalise about and thereby construct any coherent scientific explanation. Due to its lack of shared reference, Cytowic contends, synaesthesia has been marginalised linguistically and culturally and denied legitimacy and expression. He insists, however, that subjective experiences such as synaesthesia are, in fact, the 'bread and butter'³ of clinical neurology and, moreover, the only means to gauge any sensory perception. The 'quality' of synaesthesia, according to Cytowic, is that it is a direct sensory experience. It has no meaning, the sensation being memorable rather than its name: 'The experience of synaesthesia is concrete (...) it is more like a sensation than an abstract idea' (MTS, 106).

3 Richard Cytowic, *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*, London, 1994, 73, hereafter cited in the text as MTS.

Furthermore, in certain cases where the synaesthetic perceptions are overwhelmingly strong the subject can have difficulty in discerning the semantic function of language. He quotes Luria's patient S: 'What strikes me first is the *colour* of someone's voice (...) He has a crumbly, yellow voice, like a flame with protruding fibers. Sometimes I get so interested in the voice, I can't understand what's being said' (32). Here sensation takes precedence over semantics, doubtless causing considerable difficulties for the subject. This is an inversion also noted by Barthes in his essay 'Ecoute' where he observes: 'Parfois, la voix d'un interlocuteur nous frappe plus que le contenu de son discours et nous nous surprenons à écouter les modulations et les harmoniques de cette voix sans entendre ce qu'elle nous dit'.⁴ In the case S it proved hopeless asking him to convert specific experiences into general instances, a basic procedure in inductive reasoning, since the particularities of each synaesthetic experience are unique and form a singular event in the life of the subject. Cytowic and his most important case study Michael Watson had embarked upon their research into synaesthesia with both the intention and expectation of finding an identifiable physiological explanation in the geography of the brain, in Cytowic's words, 'possibly a tangle of neurons, a short circuit that we could point to and say, "Ah ha, here's the culprit"' (7). The assumption at the outset was that something was not functioning as it should, that a technical fault was interfering with the mechanics of the senses as discrete, separate modalities.

Cytowic points to many recent innovations in neurology including the relinquishment of the pivotal 'standard view' which rested on three essential concepts: first, that flow of information is linear, second, that physical and mental functions can be localised to separate parts of the cortex, different lobes being concerned with different senses, and third, that there exists a hierarchy in which the cortex dominated all that is beneath it. The cortex is the grey outer bark of the brain, only one millimetre thick, far more developed in humans than in other animals. An important corollary of this third assumption is that the supreme cortical function is language and that language *contains* the contents of our brains (which in turn rests on a notion of language as a

4 Roland Barthes, 'Ecoute' (1976), in *L'obvie et l'obtus*, Paris, 1982, 225.

recipient rather than an active producer and, further, on the assumption that any sensation not 'contained' in language is in some way impossible and illegitimate). The three assumptions together yielded another fundamentally important concept: the cortex was held to be the site of reason and the mind, in Cytowic's words 'those things that make us human' (23).

Through his study of the aphasia in Maurice Ravel which had produced a tragic situation where the composer could still conceive musically and hear music in his head but was unable to express it through writing, playing or singing, Cytowic was led to the split-brain research of the 1970s in which connections between the two hemispheres of the brain were entirely severed (as in surgery for extreme cases of epilepsy). Subsequent tests on the recipients of this somewhat draconian surgical intervention revealed what Cytowic calls 'a wonderful paradox': 'the person who speaks is not the person who perceives' (17). In these tests, input was limited to one hemisphere at a time and it emerged that each hemisphere reacted differently: 'the right hand literally does not know what the left one is doing. One hemisphere can solve a problem for which it is well suited, while the other one responds with surprise, ignorant of what is going on' (*MTS*, 17). In this way, Cytowic deduces that there is more than one personality in each subject but that the nerve fibres connecting the two hemispheres produce 'the seamless illusion of a single, integrated self—namely, the person who speaks' (17). The radical implication of this is that language is only one intellectual function, in Cytowic's words: 'Not everything we are capable of knowing and doing is accessible to or expressible in language. *This means that some of our personal knowledge is off limits even to our own inner thoughts*' (17). Moreover, he goes on to contend that: 'We actually have several streams-of-consciousness running every moment. That not all of them are accessible to language has important implications for what we can "know" in the conventional sense' (24).

With the unseating of the cortex from the position of control, monistic assumptions about rationality have also begun to be questioned and forms of knowledge derived from previously discredited categories such as emotion, intuition and other forms of mentation which are not normally accessible to self-awareness, are being re-evaluated. These forms of mentation are not located in the cortex but in the limbic system which is to be found much deeper

in the tissue of the brain. The new view of how the brain works is an almost total inversion of its antecedent. First, the flow of information is not linear but parallel, multiplex and non-hierarchical and includes mobilisation of information that does not travel along nerves. Second, functions are no longer considered to be localised in certain sections of the brain but distributed throughout. Thus a given part of the brain serves many different senses and functions, just as a given function does not reside in one particular part of the brain but is diffused over more than one area. Third, whilst our model of reality and analysis of the world outside is still a function of the cortex, it is the limbic system that makes decisions about the salience of these data. Thus our acts are ultimately determined by an emotional choice rather than a rational one. What emerges is that we know (in the broadest sense of the word) more than that which we learn through rational thought and its language. The epistemological implications of this new view are patent enough in regard to the already over-cited Cartesian *Cogito*.

Before proceeding to the synaesthetic mobilisations in the writing of Cixous and Barthes, some further germane observations Cytowic makes about the phenomenon of synaesthesia towards the end of his book merit note. He contends that synaesthesia is in fact an ordinary working process of the brain which normally remains beyond the reaches of awareness. In synaesthetes, the experience peeps through to consciousness (apparently due to a shift in cerebral metabolism) so that 'synaesthetes know they are synaesthetic while the rest of us do not' (*MTS*, 166). Synaesthesia is a multisensory evaluation of the world, 'not something that has been added, but has always existed, a multisensory awareness is something that has been lost from conscious awareness in the majority of people' (*MTS*, 167). Furthermore, he proposes that synaesthesia is not 'an isolated, esoteric quirk (...) [but that] some aspect of it points to a noëtic understanding of which everyone is capable' (166). Noëtic comes from the Greek *nous* meaning intellect, understanding. It is at the etymological root of the word knowledge but refers to a knowledge that is experienced directly and which imparts a sense of truth: truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. It thus provides an understanding of something

without a knowledge of the means of understanding it.⁵ Perhaps the most important characteristic of synaesthesia is this directness accompanied by an unshakeable certitude that the perception is real, a 'that's it!' response with a sense of insight and enlightenment.

This brief, laical foray into neurology in no way maps neatly onto the synaesthesia now to be considered in the writing of Cixous and Barthes. However, it may stand as a fertile intertext. Beyond this it demonstrates the fundamental epistemological questions implied by synaesthetic sensory perception.

Metaphorical effects and corporeality

Cixous's texts are constructed around a rich fabric of metaphor. Within the history of European writing metaphor was marginalised and denigrated in the Rationalism of the seventeenth century. Françoise Defrommont remarks that analogies were excluded as if they interfered with and de-routed 'the pure vision of abstractions'.⁶ Metaphorical thinking, she goes on, was 'feminised', inferior thought. Defrommont also makes the pertinent distinction between metaphor as ornamentation and metaphor as an embodiment of writing. The first functions to embellish an idea, in an analogous way to a photograph used to illustrate or legitimate a journalist's report. The second operates in a quite antithetical way, giving thought a corporeal base. This kind of metaphor, again in Defrommont's words 'anchor[s] thought into matter, embodying ideas, giving them something of a body—instead of just being ideas they become thinkable' (Defrommont, 117). This engenders a different dynamic in the process of thought: not to withdraw from, to abstract, but to remain in the flux. Thought becomes a mobile process requiring continuity not separation. It is no longer constituted of preordained ideas; words meet and infiltrate each other, exceeding the fixed repertoire of language. Cixous's expansive use of

5 This noëtic understanding characterises Barthes's relation to photography in *La Chambre claire*.

6 Françoise Defrommont, 'Metaphorical Thinking and Poetic Writing in Virginia Woolf and Hélène Cixous' in *The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching*, edited by Helen Wilcox, Keith McWatters, Ann Thompson and Linda R. Williams, London, 1990, 116, hereafter cited in the text as Defrommont.

metaphor is very much in the spirit of this second, material kind; in her own words: 'Langue de ma mère, moins langue que musique, moins syntaxe que chant de mots (...) ne s'écrit pas: me traverse, me fait l'amour, aimer, parler, rire de sentir son air me caresser la gorge'.⁷ Here metaphor does not serve to decorate. Rather, it is the substance of the work itself, the nearest it comes to having a structure. Furthermore, and vital to the approach of this paper, it is the body that gives meaning to the metaphorical effects she inscribes; these effects are grounded in bodily sensation. Any metaphor is possible within the terms of the body since the body is not only written but writing, not only a production of language but also a producer of it. Thus the synaesthesia encountered in Cixous's writing is the body signing itself and its metaphoricity is precisely that which gives it its materiality.

Clarice Lispector: Sensing the world

Through the work of the Brazilian author Clarice Lispector Cixous writes towards a direct, multisensory apprehension of the world. In 'L'Approche de Clarice Lispector' she claims that Lispector's writing teaches an approach; it is always in the present, within it 'chaque instant *est*'. It lets 'l'appel des choses' be heard,⁸ capturing the call which is in the thing itself, no longer separating the materiality, the physical presence of the thing, from the words used to denote it. In Lispector's writing 'les mots dans cette voix *sont* des fruits' ('L'Approche', 118, my emphasis). For Cixous, this is a writing, a relation to language, which manages to transgress pervasive patterns of preconceived thought which leave no space for thinking of the smallest thing 'selon son mode vivant' ('L'Approche', 119). This living space which Cixous calls *l'entrenous*, is, she argues, that which escapes the mechanisms of thought we are taught to employ. Here, Cixous is rearticulating the Heideggerian concept of 'Being' and joining the phenomenological call for the investigation of the 'things themselves' in the realm of philosophy. As Morag Shiach notes, Cixous's reference to Heidegger is important in that it links her deconstructive

7 Hélène Cixous, 'La Venue à l'écriture' in *Entre l'écriture*, Paris, 1986, 31, hereafter cited in the text as 'La Venue'.

8 Hélène Cixous, 'L'Approche de Clarice Lispector' (1979) in *Entre l'écriture*, 117–18, hereafter cited in the text as 'L'Approche'.

project to eradicate binary thought patterns with the positive commitment to construct different paradigms of signification based on 'the art of keeping alive'.⁹ Heidegger's critique of metaphysical thought and self-consciousness claimed that these mechanisms of thought were ways of avoiding the question of Being and, furthermore, that they posited a subject separated from others and from the world. For Heidegger subjectivity is always intersubjective and he conceives of it as a 'relational element of Being' (Shiach, 60). Cixous's *entrenous*, crucially, holds the possibility for expanded intersubjective economies. In 'L'Approche de Clarice Lispector' she stresses that 'nous devons sauver l'approche qui ouvre et laisse la place de l'autre' (119) and, still writing of Lispector, a few lines later she employs a synaesthetic paradigm to show this *entrenous*: 'Les phrases dans sa voix sont des jardins où je crois. Sont des forêts. Des panthères passent. Ses phrases à pas de panthère douce. Sa voix peuplée, sauvage, écoute' (119). The word approaches the thing and the thing is allowed to approach the word in a perpetual reciprocal movement of giving/receiving wherein the relation to the other is not one of separation but rather a kind of mobile crossing.

What Cixous discovers through Lispector (i.e. through this intersubjective space created in her writing) is an access to knowledge through the senses. The lesson of *lenteur* must be learnt, she says, the art of receiving:

Savoir recevoir est le meilleur des dons (...) il s'agit de recevoir la leçon des choses. Si nous savons penser, en direction de la chose, nous laisser appeler à elle, la chose nous mène à un espace composé de la chose et de nous. ('L'Approche', 119)

For this receptive approach the senses must be reclaimed differently: 'Savoir voir avant la vue, savoir entendre, avant la compréhension' (119). Cixous is alluding to a vision pared of its history as an apparatus of power and its fundamental implication in the history of representation as a privileged paradigm of signification in the West. By the same token the hearing she calls for attends to the sonorous substance of words as much as the meaning they are supposed to hold. Lispector has a different way of naming: 'les noms sont

9 Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing*, London, 1991, 60, hereafter cited in the text as Shiach.

des mains qu'elle pose sur l'espace, avec une tendresse si intense' (122). Here Cixous produces an image in which the naming process of language is made tactile, conferred the quality of a bodily gesture: the proximity and directness of touch. This is the kind of relationship to language she solicits. We live in violent and lazy times, she says 'où nous ne vivons pas ce que nous vivons' (122); we are not receptive to the presence, the materiality of things as they present themselves to us because we experience the world by means of an alienated language. Words as they are most often used are dried up, embalmed and reduced, to the extent that, paradoxically, they finish by obstructing the route to their referent, or as Cixous puts it 'il ne reste plus rien de la mer qu'un mot sans eau' (123). For her, this hiatus between signifier and signified should not exist; the word sea should feel wet, taste salty and smell of seaweed. She appeals to a previous edenic state where words existed in a direct physical relation to their referents:

Ils surgissaient des choses autrefois comme l'éclat de leur rire essentiel, quand, de joies, elles s'appelaient, elles exultaient leur nom-parfum; et 'mer', 'mer' sentait algues, bruissait sel, et nous goûtions l'aimée infinie, nous léchions l'étrangère, le sel de sa parole sur nos lèvres. (123)

Within the Kantian taxonomy of the senses the 'mechanical' senses of hearing, sight and touch are differentiated from the 'chemical' senses of taste and smell. The mechanical senses pertain to perception and the chemical senses to pleasure. Kant also postulated qualitative differences between the two groups: smell and taste were considered superior to sight and touch due to the latter's exteriority. He did not, however, associate pleasure and knowledge but acknowledged nevertheless that in former times pleasure commanded knowledge as experience before the fracturing of *jouir* (to have pleasure) and knowledge. For Cixous, links with that kind of knowledge must be retained and recreated; a knowledge not based upon separation, exteriority and controlling sight but rather the continuity and closeness of the chemical senses of smell and taste. Within the metaphorical substance of her writing she re-embodies the mechanical senses of hearing, touch and sight, assigning qualities ascribed to one sense to others, perpetually transfusing their imputed characteristics so that they expatiate with the language inscribing them. For example, in 'L'Approche de Clarice Lispector' Cixous writes of disencumbering vision

from all antecedent visions, in order to see, not through the memory of having seen before, but only in the instant of seeing. For Lispector, in her own words, 'mes prévisions fermaient le monde'¹⁰ and therefore she transforms her way of seeing; for Cixous, she teaches 'le survoir' and that 'pour voir (...) il faut dévoir' (127). In order to 'laisser entrer une chose avec son étrangeté' rather than to appropriate and homogenise it 'il faut mettre de la lumière d'âme dans chaque regard, et mélanger la lumière extérieure et la lumière intérieure' (123). That is to unbind sight, to use sight in an unaccustomed way: 'voir avant la vision (...) avant le récit des yeux' (123) so that the eyes function not just as an exterior sense but are also mobilised by the pleasure and the interiority of the other senses. In Cixous's *LA* this kind of vision is also impelled, through a different kind of language: 'Avec elle j'ouvre la bouche des yeux, Alors tout ce qui voit parle et chaque parole allume un autre noeud de sens'.¹¹ Here vision and language are conflated in a circularity of movement; it is language that emancipates vision and vision can then speak and each new word creates new meaning.

For Cixous, therefore, knowledge is never abstracted but always linked directly to the body. Moreover, the partitioning of the senses is both artificial and constraining and should be challenged through different paradigms in writing. In *Illa* ways in which this kind of knowledge should be acquired are developed; a rose should be felt in a rose way; things must be allowed to happen in their own modality instead of being appropriated and abstracted. She recalls how as a child, in North Africa, she wandered towards the market, before knowing the names of the streets, before proper nouns and common nouns, how the senses knew their own way 'along' the perfumes (Cixous's syntax), in sandalled feet within the movement of the market place. Again, in *Vivre l'orange*, as the title shows, she is writing towards a direct sensory contact with the world; to live the fruit, to live the colour, beyond the separation of words, calling for a continuity rather than a compartmentalisation of the senses. In Conley's words 'the wor(l)d is fruit, felt and tasted'.¹² The fruit is never

10 Clarice Lispector, *La Passion selon G. H.*, Paris, 1985, 25.

11 Hélène Cixous, *LA*, Paris, 1976, 112.

12 Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, Lincoln and London, 1984, 104, hereafter cited in the text as Conley.

cut in *Vivre l'orange*; the orange calls up all the senses by correspondence in the manner of Baudelaire's seminal synaesthetic poem 'Correspondances' where:

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
 Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
 Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
 Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.
 Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
 Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
 —Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,
 Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
 Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
 Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.¹³

Cixous discovers in Lispector's writing, as Shiach notes, the means to surpass deconstruction and begin to inscribe a different economy wherein the word approaches the object as wholly and in as unmediated a way as possible. In Lispector she encounters the kind of inscriptions that retain the integrity of the other, that approach the other without destroying it and, in turn, she brings this approach to her own writing in order to speak about Lispector. This kind of economy, where writing, in its materiality, approaches the other without appropriating it, keeping it alive, for Cixous, holds the possibility for achieving unprecedented intersubjective economies. In Lispector, it turns on what, in 'L'Approche de Clarice Lispector', Cixous calls her *attentions* (the ways in which she approaches the other). Preferably, her *attentions* move 'comme des poissons dans la lenteur', but, on occasions, they are audacious '[ils] vont aux rencontres comme des fauves douces (...) et se tiennent en tremblant dans le très-près tremblant de l'autre' (130). This intersubjective space is, for Cixous, a feminine space: 'Alors la femme est: la femme-et-l'autre. Ensemble vivant, impersonnel, qui ne peut se résumer. Ni faire histoire. Mais vit. Se passe' (130). Cixous's writing *from* (rather than *on*) Lispector's texts begins to inscribe this kind of intersubjective economy. Reading Lispector's *L'Imitation de la rose* she tells of being sent flowers, flowers that she could never have

13 Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondances' in *Baudelaire: The Complete Verse*, vol. 1, edited by Francis Scarfe, London, 1986, 61.

sent herself. They are revitalised by Lispector's way of showing them, still carrying the 'humectant' contact of Lispector's eyes upon them: 'Ainsi auréolées, elles me montaient aux yeux, et me venaient tout humides encores de regard, elles s'élevaient regardées, mieux visibles' (131).

Lispector's way of accessing the object itself in writing, without separation, achieves a kind of atopia (*a topos*—without place) of language. Each naming is an event, each event is unique and thereby language is divested of its fixing effect. In Cixous's words 'il y a une attention pour chaque naissance' (129): to impart its life each object needs a specific approach. This joins Barthes's proposition at the beginning of *La Chambre claire*: 'Pourquoi n'y aurait-il pas, en quelque sorte, une science nouvelle par objet? Une *Mathesis singularis* (et non plus *universalis*)?'¹⁴ and his utopian call further on for 'une science impossible de l'être unique' (110). Indeed Cixous herself speaks of 'la science de l'autre' ('L'Approche', 123) where language is not attenuated to the extent of being nothing but a carrier of ready-made meaning, but exists in a sensuous relation with its referent, letting it call the senses in its own way: 'Les musiques des choses résonnent toujours, attendant que nous les entendions fidèlement, avec les oreilles, avec la peau, avec les narines, avec la respiration, surtout avec la poitrine' (130).

Synaesthetic paradigms in language are a way of approaching, in writing, this kind of sensorial perception of things. Lispector's written flowers were:

un bouquet de fleurs sues, qui rayonnait, sur ma table, sur mes livres, sur les feuilles de papier et soudain je compris que je lisais à la lumière des fleurs, j'appris que les fleurs-vues donnent pendant quelques heures un éclat de lait transparent. (131–2)

and Cixous's descriptions of how we might come to this kind of perception in language are, almost without exception, synaesthetic in their internal workings:

Pour arriver au coeur de la rose, nous n'avons qu'à prendre le chemin de la rose, aller à elle selon sa voie. S'approcher avec une telle absence de soi, avec une telle légèreté (...) entrer à pas de parfum dans l'eau de son parfum sans la troubler. (134)

14 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire*, Paris, 1980, 21.

Rhythm

Cixous privileges the ear in writing; for her, the musicality of a text is paramount and the origins of writing are to be found in the aural not the visual field: 'I always privilege the ear over the eye' she remarks in an interview 'I am always trying to write with my eyes closed' (Conley, 146). However, a closer reading reveals that aural category to be inextricable from the other senses. For both Barthes and Cixous, writing is closely allied to what both have referred to as *une langue maternelle*, a language which comes from and approaches the m/other. Barthes writes of 'un amour: celui de la langue maternelle (la langue des femmes)' on one of the rare occasions when he refers explicitly to the feminine,¹⁵ and there are numerous references to a maternal tongue throughout Cixous's work: 'dans la langue que je parle, vibre la langue maternelle, langue de ma mère, moins langue que musique, moins syntaxe que chant de mots' ('La Venue', 31). Illa is searching for the voice of the mother:

Appelée? Entend des voix—ses voix. Sa voix. Toutes les voix qui soufflent entre les langues, les mémoires. Préentend. Ne voit pas à deux pas devant son corps. Des yeux faibles. Pour entendre. Le regard écoute.¹⁶

Here, corporeal sensations are carried over into voice and script and heard with a different ear: an ear which, like the eyes of Cixous's and Barthes's different vision, is linked to a kind of pre-hearing which is not separate from the other senses, not a solely exterior sense. The eye listens as it apprehends the letter on the page, a kind of blind reading: 'Ce que ma main fait couler sur le papier c'est ce que je vois-entends, mes yeux écoutent, ma chair scrute' ('La Venue', 64), whilst for Barthes: 'Tous les sens peuvent donc "regarder", et inversement, le regard peut sentir, écouter, tâter'.¹⁷

In his essay 'Ecoute' Barthes refers to the rhythmic traces that were anterior to writing; a corporeal activity that cannot be isolated to one sense modality. Rhythm, he stresses, is the grounding principle of language: 'sans le rythme, aucun langage n'est possible' (220). Furthermore, in the same

15 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Paris, 1975, 119, hereafter cited in the text as *RB*.

16 Hélène Cixous, *Illa*, Paris, 1980, 9.

17 Roland Barthes, 'Droit dans les yeux' (1977) in *L'obvie et l'obtus*, 280.

essay he proposes that *l'écoute* (listening), from its rhythmic origins, is what puts two subjects into relation with each other:

L'injonction d'écouter est l'interpellation totale d'un sujet à un autre: elle place au-dessus de tout le contact quasi physique de ces deux sujets (par la voix et l'oreille): elle crée le transfert: '*écoutez-moi*' veut dire: *touchez-moi, sachez que j'existe.* (223)

He continues, employing the terminology of Jakobson, "*écoutez-moi*" est un phatique': the language used to communicate feelings rather than ideas, 'un opérateur de communication individuel' (223). In the act of listening: 'L'interpellation conduit à une interlocution, dans laquelle le silence de l'écouteur sera aussi actif que la parole du locuteur' (223). For both Barthes and Cixous in their recognition of rhythm as the synaesthetic source of writing, it is a musical economy that is most favoured. Cixous, writing with eyes closed, listens to 'that which vibrates in almost musical fashion in me' and from there 'annotates' this rhythm in a manner homologous to that of a musician (Conley, 146). For Barthes, in his essay 'La musique, la voix, la langue', music is the medium that rescues us from 'cette *indifférence des valeurs*', the tendency, that is, to disguise and deny a grounding of any discourse of interpretation in value either by idealism or by scientism: 'Nous nageons dans "l'élément *indifférent* (= sans différence) *de ce qui vaut en soi, ou de ce qui vaut pour tous*" (Nietzsche, Deleuze)'.¹⁸ But music demands a language of evaluation, of difference. Any other kind of commentary means that 'nous sentons une sorte de chape idéologique tomber sur la matière la plus précieuse de l'évaluation, la musique' ('La musique', 246). In 'La musique' Barthes promotes the voice as 'le lieu privilégié (éditique) de la différence' (247). Moreover 'tout rapport à une voix est forcément amoureux' (247). Writing of his own amorous relation to the voice of his preferred singer Panzéra he explains how, through an attention to pronunciation (as distinct from articulation) Panzéra produces a kind of intersemiotic translation (here between language and music). Articulation functions to:

donner à chaque consonne la même intensité sonore, alors que dans un texte musical, une consonne n'est jamais la même: il faut que

18 Roland Barthes, 'La musique, la voix, la langue' (1977) in *L'obvie et l'obtus*, 246, hereafter cited in the text as 'La musique'.

chaque syllabe, loin d'être issue d'un code olympien des phonèmes, donné en soi et une fois pour toutes, soit sertie dans le sens général de la phrase. (250)

Articulation, advances Barthes, encumbers meaning with a parasitic clarity which itself is not innocent but ideologically loaded; an art of *expressivité* or more precisely of *dramatisation* (250). Pronunciation, by contrast, 'maintient la coalescence parfaite de la ligne du sens (la phrase) et de la ligne de la musique (le phrasé)' (250). This coalescence can occur since, unlike articulation where language invades music, disrupts it in an inappropriate way and pushes itself to the fore, in the case of pronunciation: 'c'est la musique qui vient dans la langue et retrouve ce qu'il y a en elle de musical, d'amoureux' (250). This process of intersemiotic translation depends, for Barthes, on a certain '*physique* de la voix (j'entends par *physique* la façon dont la voix se tient dans le corps—ou dont le corps se tient dans la voix)' (251). This voice, for both Barthes and Cixous, should not be situated in the vocal apparatus alone; it is the body showing its difference and thereby a production from all the senses.

Synaesthetic paradigms therefore not only open out perception and create the possibility for ostensibly different sign systems to enter into a process of translation, in doing so, they open the way for new intersubjective economies and different ways of approaching the other.