

Call Home Mothers Dead

“... we move away from and approach Death, our double mother, through writing, because writing is always first a way of not being able to go through with mourning for death.”

Hélène Cixous, “Coming to Writing”

“... the gesture of writing is linked to the experience of disappearance, to the feeling of having lost the key to the world, of having been thrown outside.”

Hélène Cixous, “From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History”

We might think of Adriane Little’s haunting installation work, *Call Home Mothers Dead*, as a contribution to the growing body of modern elegiac writing. While the project clearly exceeds the bounds of writing as we might traditionally define it, there is nonetheless a profound connection drawn here between writing and loss. Writing as a means both to recover and entomb this loss. *Call Home Mothers Dead* is born of the loss that shatters identity, meaning and self. It is the moment that rends the self. It is the loss of the mother and the world she carries with her. It is grief and sorrow and the simultaneous articulation of these. It is an exploration of trauma and mother loss, and, as Little herself declares, it involves “a shattering of something so important that one does not know who they are without it.”

Little’s work might usefully be read alongside that of Hélène Cixous, whose words frame this brief discussion. I suggest this because in her work Cixous traces the intricate relation between writing and loss. Indeed much of what she has to say concerning writing relates back to the embodied and very physical experiences of mourning and loss. She has stated many times that her own writing emerged from the experience of loss she encountered as a young child with the untimely death of her father. For Cixous, mourning throws us into a place we rarely, if ever, inhabit. We are literally displaced, forced to deal with a pain that severs us from the familiar, the familial. Writing from this space makes fear retreat.ⁱ It does not relieve the pain of loss, but opens the possibility of another relation with the world. “I believe that one can only begin to advance along the path of discovery, the discovery of writing or anything else, from mourning and in the reparation of mourning. In the beginning the gesture of writing is linked to the experience of disappearance, to the feeling of having lost the key to the world, of having been thrown outside. Of having suddenly acquired the precious sense of the rare, of the mortal. Of having urgently to regain the entrance, the breath, to keep the trace.”ⁱⁱ Writing weaves itself intricately around the space of loss; it both compensates for and inscribes this loss.ⁱⁱⁱ And in doing so it enables us to open out to the other, to take the risk of bridging the enormous distance between ourselves and the ultimate other – death. It is by engaging with the otherness of death that we are then able to encounter the other in life, to move toward and affirm life in the other.^{iv}

Perhaps this affirmation is symbolized in Little’s work in the figure of the dandelion - the image she refers to as the “strategy of dark beauty.” This dark beauty ensures that life unfurls, opens out toward the world once again, rather than remain within the darkness and claustrophobia of trauma. From trauma life emerges, and the very means of this passage is the sensual relation with the mother’s body: “the non-repression and inclusion

of the maternal body in writing presents a link with the pre-symbolic relation between self and m/other, and thus a way through... loss, separation and perpetual alienation...^v This writing is “a way of leaving no space for death, of pushing back forgetfulness...”^{vi} Little speaks of the matrilineal ghost, the mother as refuge or vestibule – the chamber or channel enabling our communication with the world and others.^{vii} Here the mother is linked both with trauma and its reparation. The sensual rhythms of the mother’s body motivate and underpin the gentle gesture of the dandelions in slow-frame movement. Time reverts to a non-linear space of color and chromatic effect. Let us, for a moment, think of the dandelion in terms of what Julia Kristeva refers to as the somewhat luminous image, “evoking an ‘inner experience’ rather than a referential ‘object’”.^{viii} While Kristeva’s words refer to the incestuous possession Bellini enacts in his attempt to speak both for and in the place of the mother – i.e. to provide motherhood with a language – we can use these as a place from which to ponder the significance of Little’s own re-configuration of artistic practice: “The point is to reach the threshold of repression... to reach this threshold where maternal jouissance, alone impassable, is arrayed.”^{ix} In this sense the dark beauty of the dandelion offers an alternative to a simple representation of the mother and her lost and silent body. A different economy – one that unsettles object and representation – emerges from the dream-like sequence of color and movement: “we no longer hear words or meanings; not even sounds... the voice here is silent. It bursts forth as cry only after having gone through colors and luminous spaces...”^x

Call Home Mothers Dead plays at the limits of representation. And it does so precisely through color. The luminosity of the golden dandelions and the transcendent blue sky anticipate a new writing, one that gestures out toward the abyss of maternal separation and loss in order, ultimately, to bring mourning back into day.

Michelle Boulous Walker
 Philosophy, HPRC
 The University of Queensland
 QLD 4072 Australia

ⁱ Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Hélène Cixous: Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p.26.

ⁱⁱ Hélène Cixous, “From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History”, trans. Deborah Jenson, cited by Sellers (ed) in *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p.xxvi.

ⁱⁱⁱ Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1996), p.xiii.

^{iv} Cixous writes: “writing is a gesture of love...”; see “Coming to Writing” in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, Deborah Jensen ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), p.42.

^v Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1996), p8.

^{vi} Hélène Cixous, “Coming to Writing”, p.3.

^{vii} Cixous writes: “writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me...” See: Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.85.

^{viii} Julia Kristeva, “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p.249.

^{ix} Kristeva, “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini”, p.249. Kristeva concludes: “for Bellini, motherhood is nothing more than such a luminous spatialization, the ultimate language of a jouissance at the far limits of repression, when bodies, identities, and signs are begotten” p.269.

^x Kristeva, “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini”, pp.249-50.