

Unidentifiable Literary Objects – A Special Issue

Introduction: ‘Who Could Ever Read This?’

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In *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...* Jacques Derrida describes his first reading of Hélène Cixous’ writing as an encounter with an ‘unidentifiable literary object’ [*objet littéraire non identifiable*] or ‘ULO’: ‘What is this? I asked myself more or less. What is happening here? What is happening to me? What genre? Who could ever read this?’¹ Elsewhere, in ‘From the Word to Life’, he again recalls the ‘double feeling’ of ‘dazzlement and anxiety’ engendered by Cixous’ manuscript – a manuscript that would become her first book, *Le Prénom de Dieu* [*God’s First Name*]. The ULO is, of course, the domain of both Derrida and Cixous: in different ways, their texts stretch genre, press at the limits of creative and critical thinking, unsettle the demarcation between fiction and philosophy and open up the differences between constative and performative modes of writing. This special issue aims to explore the potential of ULOs to enable us to start to think, read and write in radically new ways, bringing together the work of contemporary writers and scholars whose own texts very often play at the intersections between creative and critical theory and practice.

But in starting to write about the ULO, there is first, perhaps, a distinction to be made between the ‘unidentifiable’ and the ‘unidentified’. While Beverley Bie Brahic translates Cixous’ account of Derrida’s remark in ‘The Book I Don’t Write’ as an ‘unidentified literary object’, hinting at something that might be comprehended at some point in the future, Eric Prenowitz stresses, in ‘Cracking the Book’, that the ‘unidentifiable’ cannot and *will not* be determined, deciphered or appropriated – it remains unknown.² By excluding the possibility of its identification, Prenowitz says, ‘Derrida is precisely leaving its future open – to reading(s). He thus implicitly opposes reading to identification, the readable to the identifiable’.³ In this way, the ULO is something that is unforeseeable, not recognized when it appears, perhaps not even *appearing* as such.

Then how might we begin, as Derrida asks, to ‘read a thing like this?’ It is a question that Cixous also poses in *Insister of Jacques Derrida: ‘Where to put myself, where to begin – to read?’*⁴ Every way you look at it, the ULO resists beginning. And given this, how would we even begin to set out the ways in which this special issue might – or might fail to – arrive? Indeed, an ‘introduction’ to the ULO, such as this attempts to be, seems laughable when presented, as Derrida is in the form of an early Cixousian manuscript, with something that arrives ‘like a meteor in my garden’.⁵ Like a thing from outer space, the ULO’s origins are unknown and its path unmappable. Indeed, Derrida’s recourse to metaphor here – the slippery ‘like’ of ‘like a meteor’ – attests to our inability to apprehend the ULO, even after it has landed. And what Derrida likes about the meteor, Charles Barbour points out, is precisely its ‘unknown and unknowable origins. It lights up only once it hits the earth’s atmosphere. And that it was there beforehand, or where it was beforehand, we do not and cannot know’.⁶

Lacking a determinable origin, the ULO is always out of this world – it is necessarily *alien*.

It is no surprise, then, that the alien worms itself into a number of the contributions to this volume.⁷ In ‘Signs of Life’, Marie-Dominique Garnier examines the detection from afar of Cixous’ writing on Derrida’s ‘radar’, an extra-terrestrial arriving as if from outer space.⁸ Thinking through the flight path of the saucer and exploring possibilities for Cixous’ writing (or ‘Ci-fi’ for short) to take off, Garnier reads the ULO as a ‘becoming bird’ or ‘flying leaf’, a defiant device or ‘partially falling object’ that arrives at times in the form of a ‘*prière d’insérer*’, at others ‘an airborne prayer’.⁹ In a text that flies off the page to touch the reader, Garnier asks: ‘is a ULO an object at all or a stray collection of letters, a non-object, an eerie hum, a nonce-word in an alien language?’¹⁰ Roving somewhere between ‘animal and Ci-borg’, Ci-fi is, in the words of Derrida, a ‘kind of miracle’.¹¹ But in her own ‘ulogy’, Garnier also reminds us that Derrida’s questions – ‘*Qu’est ce qui m’arrive là ? Quel genre?*’ – can be translated as ‘What’s happening here? What type is this?’¹² In French, she writes, ‘type’ can refer both to ‘style’ and, colloquially, to ‘a bloke’; questioning the ‘type’ of the ULO, Garnier thus suggests that Derrida’s sentence ‘undergoes an untranslatable gender change’.¹³ Indeed, questions of genre/gender are at the heart of the ULO, which arrives like a meteor – a flying object that is itself, as Barbour points out, ‘both male and female [*a deux sexes*] in French’.¹⁴ Turning to a supersonic genre disc, Garnier exposes the ways that the ULO resists all efforts to fix the text according to the law of literary genre/gender and, instead, sends the text – and her reader – spinning into another wormhole entirely.

Questions of gender and genre are also picked up by Judith Still in her essay ‘Refusing Consumption and Querying Genre’, which takes the novel, *La Cheffe*, roman d’une cuisinière, by contemporary French writer Marie NDiaye, as its literary object. The novel concerns a chef (given the impossibly feminine denomination, la Cheffe) and her relationship, both sacrificial and liberating, with a particular foodstuff and *female* nonhuman animal, typically known through a violent singularity: chicken. This is not only a matter of the fraught politics of ‘eating well’, but of cooking, which is perhaps to say, writing (well). In this essay, the novel, but also the ULO more generally, is characterized ‘as a game of hide and seek’: a multi-generic detective-fiction that edges towards, as the novel’s narrator puts it, ‘the border [...] of falling into nonsense’.¹⁵ Adopting its own singular ‘narrative’ voice, Still’s essay is itself engaged in a kind of meticulous, performative detective-work, one that seeks to draw out the intricacies and paradoxes of genre, gender and species, and one that already knows, before it begins (and inevitably begins again), that it will fail (or fall). The essay, by its own admission, occupies an uncomfortable, paradoxical, space between ‘the delirious *impossibility* of identifying or deciding (*la folie*), and also the inevitability, need or desire to play the rational detective, to figure something out’.¹⁶ In the end, we are presented with an almost-unreadable (non)crime scene: a Garden of Eden, served as a meal to be consumed, in which no animals are killed and nothing is cooked. In this scene of ‘almost nothing’ we experience impossibility: it is a ‘telepathic performance’, a powerful non-event of eating, drinking, living and dying.

In *Rootprints*, Mireille Calle-Gruber describes a Cixousian text (or ULO) as embodying ‘the birth of the impossible [...] the monster – ab-norm, unnamable’.¹⁷ Remarking on this resistance to classification in ‘The Book I Don’t Write’, Cixous

compares her work to ‘one of my painfully familiar and incomplete animals’: ‘To the question: is it a book? I say it’s always a struggle. What is a book? ... Often I hand it over to my editor like a dubious child. – What’s its name? – I don’t know yet’.¹⁸ The possibilities of a monstrous textual birth or incomplete animal link in clear ways to Cixous’ writing on the ‘unforeseeable’ and Derrida’s thinking of futurity (*l’à venir/l’àvenir*’), concepts that are taken up in Laurent Milesi’s contribution to this special issue, ‘De-Monstrating Monsters’. Thinking through monstrous growths, generic hybridity and teratological formations in Derrida and Cixous – and including his own original translation into English of ‘Ci-X-OÙS’ from *Partie* – Milesi argues that there is a ‘tyrannical mastery’ implied by traditional notions of ‘style’ that both writers seek to avoid.¹⁹ Resisting the notion of a ‘masterful’ or ‘masterly’ style, Milesi cites Derrida’s desire for a new and radical form of writing in which language emerges as a monster. Exploring the relationship between monstrosity and monstration in the work of Derrida and Cixous and arguing for the necessary impossibility of naming, announcing or demonstrating the monster, Milesi’s essay reveals the ways that the designation of the monster becomes a ‘de-monstration’.²⁰ As such, the monster transforms the text into the unanticipatable *arrivant*, the future-to-come.

A further note on the birth of this monster: Milesi’s translation of ‘Ci-X-OÙS’ – which appears perhaps as a teratological growth at the heart of the essay – recalls the birth of an unnamable, unforeseeable and incomplete animal: ‘This page here mums itself to ground and mute hatches the unforereadable’.²¹ Milesi’s translation continues along oviparal lines: ‘It hatches cocoons and cuckoos more than one possible *plusje* and more than one nessence. It eggministers the home of *Plusje*’.²² Cixous’ eggcitation hatches new ways of thinking. Indeed, to borrow a thought from the narrator of Nicholas Royle’s *An English Guide to Birdwatching*, with the ULO ‘another knowledge is hatching. The entire regime of the literal is disintegrating’.²³ Perhaps, then, we might conceive of the ULO as something that hatches (taking ‘hatch’ as not only the verb denoting the opening of an egg or the noun to signify a trap door, opening or escape hatch, but also considering the figurative sense of ‘hatching’ as devising or conspiring) in unforeseen ways. How to introduce, to inaugurate a thinking of that which has not yet arrived, which ‘hatches’ but cannot be *given* birth to?

In his contribution to this issue, ‘All wards’, Royle moves ‘along the giddy footing of the hatches’, taking every direction in order to explore Cixous’ work in light of her own description of herself as ‘a creature of the bottom’, while also writing (or drawing) her name in the stars (*).²⁴ As Royle avows: ‘The Cixous call is *all wards*’.²⁵ Turning itself on its head or back, this text goes by way of a ‘draw’ (a word used by Royle as an acronym to characterize Cixous as ‘dreamer’, ‘realist’, ‘analyst’, ‘writing’), which acts as a *pull*, an unidentifiable desire, but also an inescapable death-call, a dive into the deep. Attempting to follow Cixous into the darkness (of a *hide*, perhaps), the text stumbles, falls, accidentally, but also fatefully – ‘overkeyboard’ – into telepathy, or rather, many telepaths and ‘telepathic dimensions of the literary’, from Shakespeare’s augury-dreaming Clarence to Agatha Christie’s mind-reading detective, Hercule Poirot, to his ‘own’ (a word whose possibility is contested throughout this text) ULO, *An English Guide to Birdwatching*.²⁶ A telekinetically-written love letter to the inexorable ‘draw’ of Cixous, this essay also acts as a secret weapon against ‘*lingophobia*’, warding off the ‘fear of language’ and

the widespread resistances to thinking about what ‘it does to us, the ways it inscribes us, leaves its trails upon and in us’.²⁷ ‘All wards’ is a text that takes back language and takes language backwards, all wards, safeguarding and defending it, like a ward, but also opening the doors, letting it go, morph, move, surge and fly.

From telepathy to telephony, our ‘own’ (again this word should be treated with caution) engagement with the ULO records a dialogue in absentia, taking the form of a series of missed calls, at once intentional and accidental, fictional and real, present and absent. While claiming to take place in ‘a real garden’, this piece is nevertheless impossible: it is a fake or counterfeit, perhaps even a hoax. And yet, in its unreality, it is fuelled by the hyper-real and ephemeral power of the ULO. Imagined as a form of telephonic gardening, our dialogue serves to animate, or weed out, what might be our shared responsibilities for reading and thinking today, as well as the *necessities* of reading together, of ineluctably being two-to-read. Our ‘missed calls’ are also attempts at identifying the other. But, finally, in the end, this piece is about the inevitability of ending, missing, losing – acknowledging the fact that writing lives on the borders of dying and, as we write, speak, think, we ‘grow into the arms of the unidentifiable’.²⁸ The voicemail messages that are forged here ultimately sign a kind of suicide-pact, vowing to die together: ‘We have agreed to safeguard these messages, but in recalling the call and gathering together this nosegay of signs, there is always death between us’.²⁹

Remaining with death, Aaron Aquilina refers to the voicemail message – in which the ‘voice outlives its moment of recording’ – in his reading of the suicide note in ‘Crypts, Manuscripts’.³⁰ Examining the ‘singular meeting of handwriting and death’, Aquilina discusses the autothanatographical in fiction and philosophy, demonstrating its ambivalent position between the result of, and the liberation from, illness.³¹ Performing the ways that the handwritten suicide letter simultaneously represents and marks the disappearance of the self, his essay moves in and out of the first person singular, insisting, ‘I cannot, for the life of me, not use the first person when speaking of the death of me’.³² At once stressing the personal and resisting all manner of identification, Aquilina (like a number of other contributors to this volume) unsettles notions of voice and address; in so doing, he plays out Stephen Benson and Clare Connor’s interest in the kind of creative-critical writing that is ‘fascinated by the adventures and mis-adventures of address: by the ways in which, even as we address ourselves to writing about a text or artwork, our words are on the turn, tendered elsewhere and readable by who-knows-whom’.³³ Both ‘readable’ and ‘non-readable’, the suicide note for Aquilina occupies a position between identity and its annulment, between fiction and non-fiction, between possibility and impossibility, and between the instant and forever.³⁴ Following Derrida, he connects the manuscript as *magnus scriptus* and *manus crypta*, suggesting that the suicide note emerges both as a crypt for the living dead, and as an archive, where it can only ever be ‘exhum[ed] into the future’.³⁵ In this way, Aquilina once more connects the ULO with the notion of the future-to-come. With the suicide note, it seems, the very notion of ‘the end’ is troubled and brought into question: it upends the finality of ending.

Before we end, a note on the hybrid, alien or monstrous essays (in the ‘true’ sense of *essay* as try or attempt – without implication of success) collected here. The ULO is at once a concept and an activity or experience – one that does not hold still in thought or theory – and, as a result, these essays all take place as countersignings, or

critico-literary events, of that which cannot be coded, but nevertheless demands a response. Such ‘intransigent, willful writing’ or ‘writing-as-reading’ as Rachel Blau du Plessis calls it – writing that resists identification at every turn – has, of course, a long and secret history in both literature and critical/philosophical writing.³⁶ This special issue attempts to think and engage (with) the secret history of the impossible, seeking out ways or wards to, as Derrida says of the ‘institution’ of literature, ‘*say everything, in every way*’.³⁷ Indeed, as the contributions to the issue attest, such an attempt engenders diverse forms: monstrous growths (Milesi), missed communications (Bostock/Jackson), telepathic inroads (Royle), flying saucers (Garnier), cryptic suicide notes (Aquilina) and the genre/gender of cooking and consuming (Still). But across all these pieces, we find writing, following Cixous, ‘on the side of life’.³⁸ Derrida, Cixous writes, ‘fears his own death for others’, but ‘Me: life flows towards life. Between life and life there is an unknown passage’.³⁹ The ULO follows such unknown passages or avenues, hovering, growing, calling, stumbling and flying into the future-to-come.

With our final words, we might recall Cixous’ observation: ‘In the end, you will not have had the time to begin, but this you knew in advance’.⁴⁰ Reaching towards the end and yet knowing in advance that we do not have time to begin, this introduction risks finding itself in a dead end. Perhaps, however, we might turn back to follow another path, observing Calle-Gruber’s remark in conversation with Cixous, when she says: “‘the beginnings’” in your poetic universe undoubtedly arise from a capacity for welcoming and for permeability. It’s a matter of saying yes’.⁴¹ This ‘yes’ is addressed as a welcome to our reader – not only to you, the one who reads here and now, but to the ‘you’ of the future, who arrives in an unidentifiable place, space and time.

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1. Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, 7.
 2. Cixous, 'The Book I Don't Write,' 15 [emphasis added]; Prenowitz, 'Cracking the Book,' xviii.
 3. Prenowitz, 'Cracking the Book,' xix.
 4. Cixous, *Insister of Jacques Derrida*, 108.
 5. Derrida in Cixous and Derrida, 'From the Word to Life,' 3.
 6. Barbour, *Derrida's Secret*, 141.
 7. Several of the contributions to this special issue were first presented at a symposium on the 'Unidentifiable Literary Object' held at Nottingham Trent University on 29 June 2018. The editors wish to thank the School of Arts and Humanities at Nottingham Trent University for funding and hosting this event. We would also like thank Joanne Dixon, not only for her support during the symposium, but also for the editorial assistance she has provided throughout the production of this special issue.
 8. *parallax refs*
 9. *parallax refs*
 10. *parallax refs*
 11. Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, 147; *parallax refs*
 12. Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, 7; *parallax refs*
 13. *parallax refs*
 14. Derrida, *Literature in Secret*, 133.
 15. *parallax refs*
 16. *parallax refs*
 17. Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints*, 163.
 18. Cixous, 'The Book I Don't Write,' 17–19.
 19. *parallax refs*
 20. *parallax refs*
 21. *parallax refs*
 22. *parallax refs*
 23. Royle, *An English Guide to Birdwatching*, 294.
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 33. Benson and Connors, *Creative Criticism*, 22.
 34. *parallax refs*
 35. *parallax refs*
 36. Blau du Plessis, 'f-Words,' 16, 17.
 37. Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 36.
 38. Derrida, *H.C. For Life*, xiii.
 39. Cixous, *Rootprints*, 82.
 40. Cixous is referring here to Derrida's essay, 'Psychoanalysis Searches the States of its Soul'; Cixous, *Insister of Jacques Derrida*, 93–4.
 41. Calle-Gruber, 'In the Beginnings,' 31.