

Introduction

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Only days ago, *Mosaic* concluded its fourth international, interdisciplinary conference, “A matter of *lifedeath*.” The event called together five keynote speakers along with some one hundred scholars and students from around the globe and from a wide range of disciplinary and research backgrounds to address non-oppositional ways of thinking the relation between the two terms, *life* and *death*. In agreement with several of the participants who said the same to me, it was “the best conference I have ever attended.” I cannot think of a more fitting follow-up to it than that of reading the two leading essays by Michael Naas in this “Feature Author” issue. Since the conference closed, in preparation for writing this brief introduction, I have been rereading the interview with Michael Naas that opens this issue, as well as his two wonderful essays, “Flicker 1: Reflections on Photography and Literature in the Works of Hélène Cixous” and “Flicker 2: Reflections on Cinematography and Literature in the Works of Hélène Cixous.” Admittedly, I am still close to the conference, but not only for this reason do I suggest that Naas’s essays have everything to do with the thinking, and writing, of *lifedeath*.

Whoever has not startled while driving, say on a September day in southern Manitoba, at the sudden, unexpected rush of a Northern Flicker in front of the windshield, stunned momentarily by the bright yellow or red shafts in its large wing-feathers, may not immediately associate the title word “flicker” with palpitation (of

both a bird's wing and a driver's heart), vulnerability, or a disorienting flash of death in life. As Naas explains in "Flicker 1," the title word, with its multiple associations, names in the first place a privileged figure or image in the work of Hélène Cixous, that is, an image of "the vacillating or dancing flame of a *veilleuse*," of a vigil light or candle that a family might set out on a significant date, along with a photograph of the deceased, to remember and to mourn the departed, even while "bringing the dead back into the house." Naas suggests in "Flicker 1" that we can read the entire work of Cixous through this central image of an oscillating vigil light, a *veilleuse*, "a light at once insistent and vulnerable, lively and yet exposed, always on the verge of being extinguished," always on the verge, then, between life and death. Taking his point of departure in "Flicker 1" from *la veilleuse* as an image that appears in a passage from *The Day I Wasn't There*, Naas, "in a first moment," considers "each of its elements and follow[s] its spectral presence throughout the work of Cixous."

Yet, no sooner has the reader of "Flicker 1" begun to follow Naas following *la veilleuse* as a privileged image described or projected in Cixous's work, than it becomes also an image of her work, an image of her writing as what he refers to as an "art of replacement." With its art of replacement, operating at high speed, Cixous's writing flickers, Naas suggests, "as if in the light of a *veilleuse*"; it flicks-clicks with the lightning speed of a camera shutter, thus is photographic through and through. What he calls this "*veilleuse-effect*" works by analogy, through likeness and substitution, regulating "everything from the smallest letter to the totality of the work, passing by the phoneme, the word, the sentence, the paragraph, and the book, as well as the name, the proper name, and dates." Also marked by replacement and substitution of genres, genders, and species ("One human or one animal—no matter how unique, and they are all unique—can thus always be replaced by another, another that is lost just as soon"), Cixous's work betrays the vision of one who is, herself, a *veilleuse*: "Flick, click, in the work of Cixous, everything is transformed, everything is spectralized, everything is replaced, in short, everything happens, in a click, that is, *all of a sudden, tout d'un coup*." And like the vigil lamp or candle, with its "mixture of shadow and light," this spectralizing *veilleuse-effect* invariably calls the dead back into life.

Naas notes that, as a *veilleuse*, "Cixous writes of her own writing in a series of quick, telegraphic phrases: "To write by surprise. To jot everything down in flashes. To telegraph. To go faster than death." In "Flicker 2," he moves from photography, which Cixous is both skeptical about and fascinated with, to cinematography for a further understanding of the *veilleuse-effect*, her "*principle* of this hyper-rapid substitution or replacement, this unique form of splicing or of editing, of making the most unanticipated jump cuts." And in the course of adding cinematography to photography in

these twin studies, Naas, the reader, reveals himself to be, also, a *veilleuse*; it follows that his writing, as well as Cixous's, works through a *veilleuse-effect*. For instance, in "Flicker 2" he states with confidence that without approaching it as an art of replacement, as he does in these two essays, one will always consider Cixous's writing "to be precious and pretentious at best and capricious or whimsical at worst." Yet, only a few lines later, this confidence, suddenly lost, is replaced by: "I must myself admit it: I do not always know how to read her, at what speed, if it is legitimate or necessary to go more slowly or more rapidly than my understanding, assuming that understanding rather than perception or, simply, reading is the right modality for this work." But I am wrong to suggest that this *veilleuse-effect* in Naas's own writing emerges only in the transition from "Flicker 1" to "Flicker 2," for at the very opening of his first essay he states that, if he places *la veilleuse* at the center of his reading of Cixous, "it is in order to call up phantoms from the other side, to feed this hesitant and uncertain light and so feed them, a light that is the lifeblood, the lightblood, of ghosts and specters." This vocation of "calling the dead back into the light and back to life" surely pertains to Naas, himself a *veilleuse*, as to all of his writing. We might even say that the *veilleuse-effect* is the responsibility of writing itself.

Michael Naas, Chair of the Department of Philosophy at DePaul University, was educated at The State University of New York at Stony Brook and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He is the author of *Turning: From Persuasion to Philosophy* (Humanities, 1994), *Taking on the Tradition: Jacques Derrida and the Legacies of Deconstruction* (Stanford, 2003), *Derrida From Now On* (Fordham, 2008), *Miracle and Machine: Jacques Derrida and the Two Sources of Religion, Science, and the Media* (Fordham, 2012), and *The End of the World and Other Teachable Moments: Derrida's Final Seminar* (Fordham, 2014). His recent published work includes co-translations, with Pascale-Anne Brault, of Derrida's *The Other Heading* (Indiana, 1992), *Memoirs of the Blind* (Chicago, 1993), *Adieu* (Stanford, 1999), *Rogues* (Stanford, 2004), and *Learning to Live Finally* (Melville, 2007). He is co-editor, with Pascale-Anne Brault, of Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago, 2000) and *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (Galilée, 2004), and he is co-editor of the *Oxford Literary Review*. Naas has also published numerous articles on themes in ancient and contemporary philosophy in such journals as *Philosophy Today*, *Continental Philosophy*, *Research in Phenomenology*, *Epoché*, and *Paragraph*, as well as in *Mosaic*.