

Article

Affect and Porosity: Ethics and Literature between Teresa Brennan and Hélène Cixous

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Received: 31 July 2019; Accepted: 8 October 2019; Published: 11 October 2019



Abstract: In her posthumously published work *The Transmission of Affect*, Teresa Brennan challenges the modern ego's understanding of itself as self-contained. This illusion, she argues, is supported by what she refers to as the "foundational fantasy". In explaining what this means, Brennan rejects a bounded sense of the self, arguing that affect (both positive and negative) circulates energetically between subjects. In patriarchal cultures, mothers (and "feminine beings") act as repositories of projected fear, typically carrying the greater burden of the negative affects—anger, aggression, and envy. Importantly, Brennan's work brings the question of intersubjective boundaries to the fore, arguing that these are open, and that any account of ethical relations between self and other needs to acknowledge this. Drawing on pre-modern sources, she develops a new theory of intersubjective and energetic affectivity and, in a positive vein, offers love—in the form of attention and discernment—as the positive gift of affect that can potentially circulate between bodies, infusing intersubjective relations with life. Brennan's work on the transmission of affect offers a bold and very political philosophical intervention into early twenty-first century ethical accounts. Her exploration of the intricacies of our relational entanglements with others and the material world challenges our understanding of what it means to be a self in relation to others. In effect, her account of the transmission of affect highlights the other's vulnerability to my affect, to my hostile projections, even as it accounts for the flow of affect in both directions. In a slightly different way, Hélène Cixous offers us an account of our relations with others that focusses on the self's openness to the force of the other, the self's vulnerability to the dangerous other. Here, the other is the focus of a potential threat, a potential undoing of the self. For Cixous, writing is the place of witness to the unfolding of this vulnerability or porosity between two (*entre deux*). While this essay focuses on Brennan's philosophical account, and the potentially paradoxical nature of her work to produce a theory of affect, it offers a brief discussion of the ways in which Cixous's focus on literature and writing provide a different frame for appreciating the challenge that Brennan's work makes. It explores the important ways in which Cixous extends Brennan's philosophical concerns to the domains of literature and writing. Throughout her work, Brennan calls for us to invent or reinvent a vocabulary for the exploration of discernment, the protective attitude of thoughtfulness that opens us to the other. Cixous's work, I argue, embodies this call in hopeful and optimistic ways. As such, it allows us to think of literature and writing as privileged sites for the exploration of our complex intersubjective relations.

Keywords: Teresa Brennan; Hélène Cixous; affect; porosity; vulnerability; *entre deux*; ethics; philosophy; literature

1. Introduction

Since her untimely death in 2003, there has been a slowly growing engagement¹ with Teresa Brennan's challenging work on the transmission of affect, work often depicted as supporting an "affective turn"² in critical and philosophical studies. Throughout her writing, Brennan explores the intricacies of our relational entanglements with others and the material world, claiming that, contrary to the illusion established by what she refers to as the "foundational fantasy", individual subjects are not self-contained. Objectivity posits an individual, insulated from affective connections with others. Brennan rejects this, arguing that affect (both positive and negative) circulates energetically between one subject and another. In patriarchal cultures, mothers (and "feminine beings") traditionally carry the burden of negative affects—such as anger, aggression, and envy—by becoming repositories of projected fear. Brennan's work brings the question of intersubjective boundaries to the fore, arguing that these are open, and that any account of ethical relations between self and other needs to acknowledge this. She develops a new theory of intersubjective and energetic affectivity. In a positive vein, Brennan offers love—in the form of attention and discernment—as the positive gift of affect that circulates between bodies, enhancing the intersubjective relation. Her work on the transmission of affect offers a bold and very political philosophical intervention into early twenty-first-century ethical accounts.

Hélène Cixous's work on the ambiguous *entre deux* relation³ provides us with an account of intersubjectivity in terms of porosity, permeability, and danger. For her, the *entre deux* charts the dangerous (though not solely destructive) porosity of the vulnerable space of longing between the self and other. While vulnerability is often thought of as a weakness, Cixous's work offers an account that hovers between a destructive (threatening) gesture and a regenerative (intimate) openness. Here, we can think of Cixous's account of vulnerability in terms of a susceptibility to wounding (Boon 2013, p. 85), an opening to the other in terms of the transmission of affect. As with Brennan's work on affect, Cixous's investigation of porosity takes us beyond the limits of a strict boundary between self and other, and it does so importantly in terms of literature and writing. Cixous's porous self deflates the illusion of what Brennan refers to as the contained-self. I conclude this paper by briefly exploring the important ways in which Cixous extends Brennan's very philosophical concerns with affect to the domains of literature and writing. Throughout her work, Brennan calls for us to invent or reinvent a vocabulary for the exploration of discernment, the protective attitude of thoughtfulness that opens us to the other. Cixous's work, I argue, embodies this call in hopeful and optimistic ways. As such, it allows us to think of literature and writing as privileged sites for the exploration of our complex intersubjective relations.

2. The Transmission of Affect

Brennan begins *The Transmission of Affect* (published posthumously in 2004) by revisiting and extending her earlier work⁴ on "the foundational fantasy", the illusion of self-containment. Her aim is to offer a philosophical account of the "intelligence of the flesh", a paradigm "capable of handling intentional and affective connections between and among subjects and their environment" (Brennan 2004, p. 78). The intelligence of the flesh is Brennan's term for discernment, the work connecting thinking to sensation, or the attentive attitude of thoughtfulness. It is this that exposes the

¹ This includes significant feminist engagement, though not exclusively: Jardine et al. (2007); James (2006); Ahmed (2008); Gorton (2007); Figlerowicz (2012); Gunew (2009); Blackman (2008); Labanyi (2011); Rice (2008); Muñoz (2007); Holding (2007); and the philoSOPHIA 2017 Annual Conference, the theme of which, "Affect and Social Justice", honored Brennan's legacy in the field. <http://www.philosophaiafeministsociety.com/conference-2017-1> For a discussion of the events surrounding Brennan's death, see Harari (2011).

² For notable contributions to the "affective turn" or the "turn to affect", see Massumi (1995); Sedgwick and Frank (1995); Gregg and Seigworth (2010); Berlant (2011); and Pedwell (2014).

³ The *entre deux* involves a staging of otherness, a passage between the self and the strangeness of the other, an event "which evicts us from ourselves" (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 1997, pp. 8–9).

⁴ See Brennan (1992, 2000, 2002).

illusory nature of the ego's belief in its self-containment, whereby challenging much of our modern philosophical, cultural, and political intuitions in the West. Such intuitions arise with the emergence of a bounded conception of the self, allowing us to assert our isolation and containment as fully separate and independent subjects. Brennan maintains that the self-contained Western self is a construction dependent on projecting unwanted affects, such as anxiety and depression, outside or beyond us. In order to be effective, she writes, "the construction of self-containment also depends on another person (usually the mother, or in later life, a woman, or a pliable man, or a subjugated race) accepting those unwanted affects for us" (12). The transmission of affect works simply through "energy and its unconscious repression" (12). Repressed affect is either projected outwards, toward and onto the other, or—less frequently—introjected inwards, toward the self.

Containment, Brennan contends, is constructed rather than given or natural, and it is the foundational fantasy that helps us to understand how (in the West) it is common, in the modern age, that we experience ourselves as contained and separate from others, as individuals who can remain largely unaffected by the thoughts, feelings, and investments of others. "Common sense" dictates that "I" exist within the strict limits of my own visible corporeality. The transmission of affect challenges such common sense, offering an explanation for precisely how we connect or are bound to one another at the energetic level: "the level at which my affect enters you and yours, me" (14). Additionally, it provides greater depth to Brennan's earlier account of the foundational fantasy, providing an alternative way of thinking through the consequences of an illusory self-containment. It explains "why we are likely to judge the other, to project certain affects on the other" (14), and to see ourselves as superior and separate (111). It also explains "why we are willing to see the other as the origin of negative affects, such as envy and aggression, which we would rather disown in ourselves" (14). For Brennan, the foundational fantasy is grounded in an archaic and undiagnosed aggressive projection on to the mother, who is expected to carry the burden of the negative affects (due, presumably, to her abject association with nature and corporeality). She works closely here with the object relations theory of writers such as Wilfred Bion and Melanie Klein,⁵ modifying this somewhat to argue that women in general carry the negative affects. Evidence of this can arguably be seen in the disproportionate levels of domestic violence directed toward women in intimate patriarchal contexts, a consequence of an undiagnosed and unconscious association of all women (rather than solely the mother) with abject nature and corporeality. Brennan writes: "Women, I hazard, regardless of whether they are mothers, have carried the negative affects . . . [however] a better term than 'women' would be 'feminine beings,' by which I mean [all] those who carry the negative affects for the other.⁶ These are most likely to be women, but the disposition of the negative affects varies, especially when racism is a factor" (15). Brennan suggests that women, people of color, and marginalized groups are often targets for the hostile projections of negative affect. Such projections compound in the case of intersectional oppressions. By acknowledging in her work the connection of both racism and sexism with the projection of negative affects, Brennan offers us a nuanced way of posing potentially intersectional philosophical questions regarding the prevalence of violence in contemporary intersubjective relations; violence here understood as a potential consequence of negative affect.

In what we can interpret as a prescient gesture, Brennan links her observations of hostile projection onto oppressed groups with the question of borders and boundaries,⁷ highlighting the fundamental insecurity at the foundation of the contemporary contained-self. Is it possible, she asks, as the

⁵ Bion (1961) and Klein (1957). See also Boulous Walker (1998, pp. 141–44).

⁶ Brennan's statement here can be read alongside Julia Kristeva's work on misdirected abjection, i.e., the manner in which all women (not only the mother) stand in for the abject as targets of a degraded and dangerous corporeality. See Kristeva (1982) and Oliver (1993, pp. 48–68).

⁷ "Have boundaries come to matter because self-definition by projection is less available than it was during the last few sexist and colonial centuries—there are now too few willing receptacles—or because of an accumulation of environmental-inflected affects. Either way, boundaries may matter now because there is too much affective stuff to dispose of, too much that is directed away from the self with no place to go" (Brennan 2004, p. 15).

sexist and colonial legacies of past centuries are challenged, that less traditional opportunities for projection exist? If so, does this account (in the West) for the increasingly neurotic policing of our (personal/social/political) borders?

... the Western individual [is] especially more concerned with securing a private fortress,⁸ personal boundaries, against the unsolicited emotional intrusions of the other. The fear of being ‘taken over’ is certainly in the air, although the transmission of negative affect generally is not recognized for what it is. Boundaries, paradoxically, are an issue in a period where the transmission of affect is denied. (15)

In a period of mass migration, the ongoing Syrian crisis, Brexit, and Trump, it is tempting to think of the isolationist stances of many countries, governments, and political movements in terms of Brennan’s account of the negative affects. Private fortresses and personal boundaries enlarge to encompass nation states and national frontiers—all intent on securing borders against the threat of the unfamiliar and invasive other; intent, too, on projecting unwanted affect on to a scapegoated other. In this sense, Brennan’s work can be helpful for thinking through the projection or transmission of negative affect in terms that link the personal with the public, the self with the State.⁹ Here the body politic has the potential to operate in a manner not dissimilar to the body—projecting hostility and aggression out beyond its own borders. Colonized communities, the “Third World”, and others operate here as the “feminine beings” co-opted to accept such hostile projections.

For Brennan, these ideas concerning the transmission of affect have a pre-modern European history that she thinks is virtually lost by the eighteenth century. For example, in France in the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne’s writing on energetic relations between young and old and, in the seventeenth century, Nicolas Malebranche’s work on the emotions (especially sadness), both indicate an appreciation of energetic transmission. This line of thought is disrupted (though not entirely lost) after the seventeenth century. With an emphasis on sight—“the sense that renders us discrete”—the eighteenth century (the *siècle des lumières*) secures individual boundaries (17).¹⁰ By the nineteenth century, sight has become “the first of the senses, and to this day the only sense, to attain objective status” (17).¹¹ The idea of objectivity as somehow free of affect arises along with the subject/object distinction, a distinction isolating the self from others and the world around it. As we have seen, this contained or bounded self founds a fantasy of discrete isolation, of separation and of distance (19), establishing reality as contained affect:

The Western psyche is structured in such a way as to give a person the sense that their affects and feelings are their own, and that they are energetically and emotionally contained in

⁸ Brennan’s reference to the self as “a private fortress” recalls Lacan’s discussion of the self, imagined as a fortress, in the famous “Mirror Stage” essay; see [Lacan \(1977\)](#).

⁹ Brennan’s work linking self with the State parallels an aspect of Norbert Elias’s early sociological work, where he couples a bounded (or self-contained) sense of the self with an equally bounded sense of society. See [\(Elias 1991\)](#). Thanks to Matthew Lamb for suggesting this link.

¹⁰ Susan James challenges this, suggesting that “many eighteenth-century writers [e.g., David Hume and Adam Smith] acknowledge the existence and significance of passionate transmission” ([James 2006](#), p. 104). James notes, though, that there is a significant change in understanding (around this time) relating to the mechanisms that move the affects. Rather than entering or disturbing our bodies, the affects of others work on our imagination. Accordingly: “a broadly physical interpretation of transmission gives way to a broadly psychic one, which is compatible with, and may provide evidence for, a comparatively resilient conception of the boundary around the self. Ultimately, it could be argued that accounts (such as Smith’s) “analyses sympathetic transmission as taking place mainly in thought, and as only minimally dependent on the body” (105).

¹¹ “... nineteenth-century romanticism is the place where transmission retreated to, and like most retreatants, lost touch with social reality, for ill as well as good. The idea that the emotional connections between beings have an energetic force of their own, by dint of magnetism and romantic association, became less scientifically respectable” (18). For a discussion of the “nobility” of sight and its complex links with objectivity in the Western imaginary, see [Jonas \(1953\)](#) and [Boulous Walker \(2017, pp. 104–8\)](#).

the most literal sense. In other words, people experience themselves as containing their own emotions. (24–5)¹²

Charles Taylor's work on early-modern sources of the self explains this in terms of a change from external to internal accounts of ethical and moral being. For Taylor, the early-modern period is accompanied by "an internalisation of moral sources" or passions, with "the sources of moral strength" no longer seen as outside the self. Taylor describes the appearance of a bounded conception of self as a move away from an external account of affect, a move that instrumentalizes and internalizes the self's rational control over body, world, and passion (Taylor 1989, p. 151).¹³ Taylor's description of the historical emergence of an internalized sense of self is helpful for explaining why Brennan's recovery of a pre-modern externalized self appears literally *out of place* in the contemporary world. He writes:

"Our modern notion of the self is related to, one might say constituted by, a certain sense . . . of inwardness . . . In our languages of self-understanding, the opposition 'inside-outside' plays an important role. We think of our thoughts, ideas, or feelings as being 'within us' . . . We are creatures of inner depths . . . [This] is in large part a feature of our world, the world of modern, Western people. The localization is not a universal one, which human beings recognise as a matter of course . . . Rather it is a function of a historically limited mode of self-interpretation . . . the localization is bound up with our sense of self, and thus also with our sense of moral sources . . . when a given constellation of self, moral causes, and localization is *ours*, that means it is the one from *within* which we experience and deliberate about our moral situation. It cannot but come to *feel* fixed and unchallengeable, whatever our knowledge of history and cultural variation may lead us to believe". (Taylor 1989, pp. 111–12)

Brennan's return to an externalized account of affective transmission offers a creative reworking of repressed pre-modern ways of thinking of the self, a reworking that forces us to engage with what Taylor refers to as our fixed and unchallengeable beliefs concerning the constellation of self and moral cause. In doing so, she counters the isolating repressions of the foundational fantasy—and the self-contained or bounded subject this gives rise to—to explore what I have already referred to as the intelligence of the flesh. It is here, she maintains, that the body is implicated in its own thinking. The body's "consummate intelligence" outruns the "slower linguistic consciousness, which formulates the reasons for our actions, claims intentionality after the fact, but is *not the only intentional force within us*" (146 emphasis added). There are, she claims, "subjective, affective, and driven paths embedded in flesh and blood"; there are "intentions beyond those of the conscious self, although the conscious self works hard to convince itself that its actions are done for its own ends" (146). With this, Brennan rethinks intentionality in a direction that would not be out of place, I think, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's important late phenomenological work.¹⁴

Brennan opposes the ego or ego-consciousness with what she refers to as the discerning I, the "Other I" (162), or the "organizing soul" (163). This couple (ego/"Other I") founds a series of ongoing oppositions that play between the poles of the self-contained subject and the intelligence of the flesh.¹⁵

¹² Self-containment coheres with self-absorption and Brennan argues that the foundational fantasy disposes the self to perceive "activity as mindless when it is not directed from the standpoint of self-interest" (136). While constructing a self-contained barrier against the other, the foundational fantasy is also involved in promoting an inertia that slows the subject energetically (147).

¹³ See James (2006, pp. 103–4) for a brief comparison of Brennan's and Taylor's accounts.

¹⁴ Indeed, a discussion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's early work on the body-subject, embodied consciousness, and his reworking of intentionality is also appropriate here. Surprisingly, there is only one brief mention of Merleau-Ponty's work in Brennan's text (Brennan 2004, p. 108) and this is in reference to his account of subjectivity as subject to a spatial operation. See Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968).

¹⁵ Brennan's work is structured through a series of interconnecting binaries, though terms such as attention and discernment are meant to undo or deconstruct any simple opposition between, for example, mind and body, i.e., to demonstrate the embodied nature of consciousness. Brennan states that her thinking in binaries approximates "the palpable experience of being pulled in two directions" in relation to the other, e.g., to be angry and to criticise, while simultaneously being drawn to listen to and communicate with the other (120).

While the ego is tied to judgment, projection, and the negative affects, the “Other I” is the locus of discernment, love, and living attention. The ego is preoccupied with “me” and “my interests”, and acts in ways that threaten others in the pursuit of short-term self-interest (163). We can think of the ego as the site of the spontaneous emotions (negative affects), and the “Other I” as the domain of the senses. The senses are the vehicles of attention—“the seneschals of attention” which connect the cognitive faculty of linguistic thought with the “fleshly knowledge or codes of the body” (136). Sensory registration “bypasses perceptions structured from the subject standpoint” in order to search for a language of soft reason to circumvent the ego (137). The senses, Brennan reminds us, are not the emotions; they are, rather, “the vehicles for their discernment” (137).

The ego-consciousness, Brennan writes, “knows less than the senses whose multiple communications battle with the ego’s censorship and denial.” Both the senses and the information channels of the flesh “are intelligent, aware, and struggling either to overcome or get through to a slower, thicker person who calls itself I, or worse, me” (138). The ego and the senses both speak; the ego a language of the affects, and the senses a language of soft reason.¹⁶ Whether soft reason infiltrates our ego-consciousness depends largely, as we will soon see, on opportunities for the education of the senses in the arts of discernment, love, and attention.¹⁷

3. Attention and Affect

Of the many couples Brennan constructs, the distinction between attention and affect is possibly the most illuminating, providing as it does a key to Brennan’s thinking on the subject. While both direct energy toward the other, they do so in considerably different ways. Attention toward another can carry with it negative affect or self-interest, but this is different to attention that originates in love. “Attention to something other than oneself, or the living energy that enlivens another without affective penalty, is not the same as an affect directed toward another, because the affect carries a message of self-interest along with the attention it rides on” (41). Self-preservation and self-interest¹⁸ strengthen the ego, which thrives on negative affects such as anger, anxiety, and fear. In fact, Brennan claims that the ego is simply a constellation of affects formed around the subjective standpoint (118). The egoistic constellation or gathering of affect reinforces the aggressive barriers of self-containment. For Brennan, the transmission of negative affect is evident in the processes of judging and projecting. Passionate judgment in the form of comparison (envy and humiliation or narcissistic superiority) distances the self from the other through fear, anxiety, and paranoia (109) and by generating aggressive reactions. This egoistic constellation is, Brennan claims, increasingly solidified “as the Western centuries progress” (106). For Brennan, the hardening of the negative affects is a social phenomenon, with the consequence that transforming them requires *political* as well as *personal* work (139).¹⁹ In former times in the West, the aggressive quality of the affects were to some extent disciplined and possibly even catheted by social ritual designed to dissipate the energy of negative affect. Spiritual exercises, religious practice, and strict codes of manners²⁰ have all served in different ways and at different times to counter the extreme spectrum of negative affect:

¹⁶ Brennan’s work, here, brings to mind Emmanuel Levinas’s distinction between a coercive reason and a noncoercive “sweet” reason. See [Levinas \(1998\)](#).

¹⁷ Brennan links the senses with feeling, distinguishing them thus: “By ‘sensing,’ I mean the deployment of smell and hearing as well as open vision, while by ‘feeling,’ . . . I mean the accurate and rapid interpretation of this information via language. Feelings are sensations that have found a match in words” (19). Elsewhere, she refers to the “educated feelings” (122).

¹⁸ Brennan claims that “the place of self-interest, or the subject-centred standpoint, is at the bottom of the prejudice against the intelligence of the flesh” (140).

¹⁹ And further: “In political as well as personal cases, changing the disposition of the affects (from passivity-inducing and raging judgments of the other to love or affection) requires practice and knowledge. The understanding and deployment of feelings is critical in both endeavours as the means for discerning affects and reconnecting with the original knowledge of the senses” (139).

²⁰ Angela Nagle’s outstanding work on manners in relation to current debates around the myth of “political correctness” is relevant here; [Nagle \(2017\)](#).

The other I, the one who once struggled with demons, then fought the passions, and now negotiates with the ego, is less and less in evidence. This is especially apparent in the decline of religious practices and civil codes of courtesy . . . civil and religious codes may be remnants of a conscious knowledge of transmission. In cultures where knowledge of transmission is unconscious, these codes have less meaning and are easily displaced by arguments that one should be ‘free to express one’s feelings’. As the stoically inclined realized long since, *if freedom means anything, it is freedom from possession by the negative affects*. (118 emphasis added)

For Brennan, affect can partially be understood through the psychoanalytic lens of the death drive. As we know from Freud, stress, anxiety, envy, and aggression work in the service of the death drive to undo connections and to destroy things. Affect, Brennan claims, “works against connective growth rather than for it” (36); as such it results in a loss of energy and a depletion of the subject. This is no doubt why the ego is so concerned with its own self-preservation, and while this can very clearly be to the good, it can also provide the foundation of an aggressive injustice toward the other—an energetic projection of negative affect designed to release hostility and to wound and deplete the other. Affect in the service of self-interest calculates advantage for the ego and severs links with the other, including the otherness of one’s own bodily self (141). By focusing on its own ends, the ego sets itself up as judge in all interactions involving the other; in fact, judgment *is* the motor of the projection of the affects.

4. Judgment as the Projection of Affect

In Brennan’s account, judgment involves a kind of Hegelian projection by the self onto the other, or by the master onto the slave. Judgment frees the subject from its own negative or aggressive affects, but only if the other is willing to carry the projected affect (111).²¹ “For the one who is projected upon, the drive becomes an affect, a passionate judgment directed inward, a judgment that constitutes a kind of hook on which the other’s negative affect can fix” (111–12). The subject’s projected judgment, if taken on by the other as aggression, can be turned inward and experienced as depression, leaving the other depleted and lacking in energy. This projected judgment temporarily frees the subject of his or her negative affect. The transmission of affect is thus Brennan’s way of speculating on what we can call the *porosity* of the energetic exchange between subject and other at the intersubjective level.

. . . when I judge the other, I simultaneously direct toward her that stream of negative affect that cuts off my feeling of kinship from her as a fellow living, suffering, joyful creature . . . The act of directing negative affects to the other severs my kin tie with her by objectifying her. I make her into an object by directing these affects toward her, because that act marks her with affects that I reject in myself—‘these affects do not exist in me, but in her.’ I assume that she does not feel as I do. At the personal level, the othering underpinned by judgmental projections is evident in the scapegoating that occurs in most familial or professional communities. At the cultural level, these judgmental projections feature in othering by race or sex or sexual orientation. Here, the other, collectively, becomes feminized,

²¹ The question of the other being willing to carry the affect is a complex one. What does the term “willing” convey here, a fully conscious awareness, or something less than this? If we consider that Brennan’s account focuses on women and “feminine beings” as those most often the recipients of projected affect, then Simone de Beauvoir’s account in *The Second Sex* could be helpful. Recall that Beauvoir inquires into the nature of woman’s *willingness* to be other to man’s absolute subject. From here, she questions whether this amounts to an act of moral fault on the part of woman, or whether the category of oppression can help us to see this in another light: “our perspective is that of existentialist ethics . . . There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back onto immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the *en-soi*—the brutish life of subjection to given conditions—and of liberty into constraint and contingency [object-being]. This down fall represents a *moral fault* if the subject consents to it; if it is inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and *oppression*. In both cases it is an absolute evil. Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects” (Beauvoir 1984, pp. 28–29, emphasis added).

that is, styled untruthful by nature, too emotional, less logical, more superstitious than us reasoning beings. (119 emphasis added)²²

Judgment, for Brennan, is the state of being *possessed* by the affects. Discernment, as we will see, is the ability to *detach* from these affects—to be *self*-possessed. Grief, anxiety, and fear are states that allow negative affects, such as anger, to take hold (119). It is these affects that we then project in our various passionate judgments of the other, diminishing our abilities (both in judging and being judged) to concentrate and to pay attention (126–7). Judgment deploys the energy of the negative affects either by projecting externally as anger toward the other, or by introjecting internally as depression.

If we conceive the moment of judgment as the moment in which we forcefully embrace or project an affect, then we can accept that the judgment itself is a deployment of energy directed toward an object, and as such, an affective force in itself. But because the stream of judgments one makes in daily life takes place in the context of affective transmission, the lessons learned from the comparison of states of feeling are constantly interrupted by waves of affect. It is not only one's own inner states that are the objects of a meditative investigation by reflection and evaluation, as they were for Descartes and Hobbes. It is also a question of oneself and the other. (126)

Whether projected or introjected, judgment disrupts our attentive faculties, diminishing our abilities and opportunities for self-reflection and for civilized relations with the other. In this sense, the ego isolates itself further from the other and the world. When judgment turns to coldness, or more particularly to cold calculation, attention is suspended in favor of a preoccupation with one's own position and a narrowing of one's own focus. "It forecloses the feeling intelligence at work in 'evenly suspended attention'²³ in which one is open to new ideas about the other". And because the feeling intelligence "works by making connections between new and existing ideas, any constraint on it (such as a preoccupation with prestige) is a constraint on the soul's growth through knowledge" (131). A hostile or calculating judgment, in Brennan's account, closes down our relations with the other and our future possibilities in and through our selves. It does so by consciously denying the affective connectivity (and its consequences) that circulates energetically between subject and other.

5. Attention and Discernment

We have seen that attention and affect are at the heart of Brennan's energetic account of intersubjectivity. We have looked briefly at affective transmission and the projections of judgment that sustain this energetic transfer. It is time, now, to look at attention and the role it plays in Brennan's account of discernment which, for her, counters the negative projection of judgment. While judgment attaches to and is possessed by the affects, a cultivated attention provides us with the means to detach from these. Brennan has many ways of talking about this attentive mode but, in each case, it indicates a living energy devoted to contemplation, reflection, and love. Both love and reason are names she ascribes to the living attention that allows us to detach from the negative affects.²⁴ While judgment

²² And further: "When Rousseau in *Émile*, or *On Education* demands that Sophie be educated to lie, while Émile only speaks the truth, he is doing no more than putting the realities of modern affective projections into words. By encouraging attitudes of suspicion, or (worse) encouraging the idea that a privileged class, sex, race, or caste is free of dissembling, emotionality, or stupidity, one comes to overvalue one's own capacities" (119). We can think of Brennan's "feminized other" as those recipients of the feminine side of the "symbolic distribution" that Luce Irigaray explores throughout her work. In this sense, the "symbolic distribution" that separates reality out (hierarchically) into mind/matter, culture/nature, and masculine/feminine can be understood as a judgmental projection of a patriarchal worldview. See Irigaray (1985).

²³ Brennan borrows the phrase "evenly suspended attention" from Freud's use of the term, referring to a state in which we attend lightly and non-deliberately by refraining from "confirming what one already knows" in order to remain open to new ideas about the other. (Brennan 2004, p. 197, n. 20).

²⁴ Brennan writes: "... reason and love are both names for aspects of living attention; living attention is the condition of reasoning and the embodiment of its connective ability as well as the gift from the mother to the child or the lover to the beloved" (41).

involves either the projection or introjection of affect, attention detaches somewhat paradoxically by permitting us to embrace the affect. What I think Brennan means here is that through discernment and living attention a different form of judgment is possible, and while she does not refer to it in this way, I suggest that it comes close to Jean-François Lyotard's notion of indeterminate judgment—a judgment that judges in the absence of criteria.²⁵ For Brennan, this paradoxical detaching and embracing of affect allows us, with the help of concentration, attention, and reflection (a concentrated change in thought), to resist and ultimately to transform the affect and thus to modify its energetic pathway. This transformation, however, is no easy task and is only possible in climates where love, hope, and optimism flourish (129).²⁶ In such climates, we can face the affect without the fear or anxiety that in other contexts bind us to it.

While Brennan ties affect and judgment with the death drive, she sees living attention as an expression of the life drive—the principle that organizes, binds, unites, and connects. Acting and thinking are the results of attention in the service of the life drive, and intellectual concentration exists where and when the subject is permitted to thrive (36). The field of living attention is, for Brennan, the life drive directed toward “a perpetual act of love” (117).

Attention is attentive to the inner silence that occurs in the cessation of projected affect. In this state one can literally attend to the affect; one can reflect on the negative affect one experiences. This simultaneous embracing/detaching involves “an exercise in feeling, but feeling of a calming and discerning variety” (128). By liberating reflection, one is able to disarm or disrupt the cycle of negative and aggressive affect.²⁷

The “Other I”, rather than the ego, is the agency that gathers attention in order to discern those affects capable of disrupting concentration, reflection, and focus. In this, it supports the best work of philosophy and the philosopher. Brennan maintains that it “directs attention away from fantasy and distraction”, providing us “an alternative to the subject-centred focus” (129). The attentive mode of the “Other I” bypasses the projected and introjected pathways of judgment in becoming a conscious consciousness (155) capable of *expressing* or putting into words what has been overlooked or repressed in the porous space between subject and other: “the more conscious we become of what we repress . . . or ignore, the less we think in projected and judgmental terms, the less consciousness is drowned in the swamp of affects” (155). In order for the “Other I” to attend to this ignored or repressed space between self and other, we need to cultivate “attention to the pathways of sensation in the body” (153).

Such attention is the work of discernment, and Brennan argues convincingly that to discern is to challenge the obstinate and well-worn pathways of affective transmission. While the negative affects result in the projection or introjection of judgment, attention (pre-eminently living attention) results in discernment—a faculty altogether different from the judgmental judgment that Brennan describes. Like attention, discernment helps us simultaneously to embrace and detach from the affects. “Discernment, in the effective world, functions best when it is able to be alert to the moment of fear or anxiety or grief or other sense of loss that permits the negative affect to gain a hold. Discernment then is allied to a position in which one receives and processes without the intervention of anxiety or other fixed obstacles in the way of the thinking process” (119–20). Discernment works to reconnect thought to affect, thus permitting us conscious awareness of the transmission of affect. Once affect is conscious and discerned, we have options for how we are able to respond to and deal with the negative affects. The illusion of self-containment in the founding fantasy helps to perpetuate the less than conscious appreciation of the transmission of affect (114). As self-contained, discrete, and insular beings, our

²⁵ This point requires a paper in its own right. See Lyotard's *The Differend* (Lyotard 1988) and my discussion of it in Boulous Walker (1998, pp. 68–84).

²⁶ Brennan notes: “That optimism also effects a biochemical shift (where different hormonal directions take over from others) is now a matter of record” (129).

²⁷ “One lets go of the affect by examining its course or by allowing the course of other, calmer, feeling to assert itself. This examination means exercising attention, which is literally an aid to growth, whether given to oneself in the process of liberating reflection (antithetical to narcissistic fantasy) or to those who need it” (128).

consciousness (understanding) is actually less than conscious, in that our negative projections toward others remain opaque to, or hidden from, our conscious minds. As we have seen Brennan claim, while knowledge of the transmission of affect was, in the West, once conscious, the “deadening, passifying affects” of the modern age have worked to repress this knowledge. As a consequence, the problem of discernment—of how we practice a discerning attention—becomes a major concern in the contemporary world (117). Philosophy is key here, as ancient philosophical practice reunites us with what we might call attentive discernment. Brennan writes: “forms of reflective or meditative analysis have been in practice since the origins of philosophy (and this practice originally constituted philosophy)” (117). I think philosophy in this ancient form *is* attentive discernment, and its roots in what Pierre Hadot would refer to as “spiritual exercises”²⁸ support Brennan’s account of the need for personal and political transformation. Philosophy becomes, once again, a way of life, a practice or series of reflective exercises offering us opportunities to perfect our relations with our self and with others.

Discernment is the practice that bridges the senses with the intellect, searching for an expression or words to communicate feelings that may otherwise remain mute, undisclosed. Feelings, in Brennan’s account, are sensations which have been expressed. Discernment works:

by sensing (touching, hearing, smelling, listening, seeing) and the expression of the senses, particularly in words. It works by feeling (sometimes in the dark), and it works deductively, often with insufficient information; it makes mistakes when it is rushed to conclude before its time (it is rushed by the ego, which always needs a plan) or when it is delayed by the ego (which is always anxious about doing the wrong thing). Discernment, when it doubts the ego’s judgment, registers as a feeling. Sometimes such feelings can be articulated with relative exactitude; they can be named, and reasons for their existence can be adduced. But this, precisely, requires a vocabulary; that is why we defined feelings as sensations that have found a match in words. (120)

So, discernment is an expression of the senses and one that registers as a feeling when it finds itself at odds with the ego’s judgmental projections. This fine process of discernment has much to say (I think) to Lyotard’s work on judgment, the *différend*, and the injustice that registers as feeling.²⁹ Both Brennan and Lyotard provide us with a philosophical or ethical vocabularies to begin thinking through our intuitive modes of intersubjective exchange with the other. There is a connection, too, with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s literary work on reading for *Stimmung* “to follow configurations of atmosphere and mood in order to encounter otherness in intense and intimate ways” (Gumbrecht 2012, pp. 12–13). Gumbrecht refers to this experimental form of reading in terms of “discovering sources of energy in artifacts and giving oneself over to them affectively and bodily—yielding to them and gesturing toward them” (Gumbrecht 2012, p. 18). Ultimately, reading for *Stimmung* transforms the inner self in vital and energetic ways, reminding us, too, of the importance of writing and literature in a discerning exploration of the other and the self.

Earlier, I referred to the importance of the education of the senses in the art of discernment if the language of soft-reason is to have any chance to infiltrate ego-consciousness. As we have seen, Brennan claims that the education of the senses and the education of the feelings is inadequate in the modern world, and that given the decline of religious codes and codes of courtesy, philosophical practices of discernment become all the more important. Practices of comparison, detachment, and living attention promote the discerning qualities required for a conscious awareness of the transmission of energetic affect. Brennan refers to these practices as habits of personal discernment. She writes:

²⁸ See Hadot (1995, 2002).

²⁹ Lyotard (1988).

The production of habits appropriate to discernment is a matter of personal practices involving comparison, recollection and memory, and detachment. These practices are held in common in the meditative tradition in philosophy, in psychoanalysis, and in meditation itself . . . Personal discernment, in summary, involves evaluations of one's inner states and evaluations of the origin of the affects. These are effected by detaching from one's passionate judgments and affective depressions, and by observing their sequence. One discerns these things with attention. (126, 130)³⁰

While Brennan's descriptions of the philosophical practices of discernment may appear to occupy the preserve of the initiated, it is important to remember that her insights are founded on what we might refer to as a range of "everyday" practices that provide us relief from an unthoughtful or unthinking relation with negative affect. These, very simply, revolve around a conscious, intentional, and attentive relation with love. For example, Brennan claims that the other feels it when we offer love or the gift of our attention, and that the negative affects are transformed when love "or its variants (wit, reason, affection)" undo aggression (135). For Brennan, "the transformation of the affects at large requires being in the world, rather than living the life of the mind. It requires subjecting oneself to eddies or even torrents of affects, while somehow maintaining equilibrium. Such is the practice of souls who, when assailed by envy or contempt or rage do not take it personally, for they know that these are forces that possess even the finest souls, whose discerning agencies sometimes cower in the corners of their possessed minds, waiting for it to be over" (135). Kindness, Brennan claims, is simply the refusal "to pass on or transmit negative affects and the attempt to prevent the pain they cause others"; it is the "protective attitude [or thoughtfulness] that stands between another and the experience of negative affects". Love is "seeing the other in a good light, giving them the good image, streaming one's full attentive energy toward another and another's concerns, rather than one's own" (124). Kindness and love are simple and everyday interventions, ones that literally position us as thoughtful beings or bodies between the other and the negative projections. By putting our bodies on the line, we refuse to perpetuate (unthoughtful) hostility and aggression. We choose connection rather than separation. We listen and wait, where fools—in other circumstances—may choose to rush in.

Attention is tied to consciousness—to Brennan's conscious consciousness (attentive to its own potential projections)—and the more we practice living attention with and through discernment the less we are held by projected and judgmental affect, the "less consciousness is drowned in the swamp of affects" (155). But, for Brennan, this kind of consciousness is dependent on inventing or reinventing a language appropriate to the intelligence of the flesh, as presently we are ill equipped to connect sensation, affect, and word (153):

"Extending conscious sensation, finding the words or images, means grasping the nuances of fleshly grammar and alphabets". (155)

All of this requires connecting thinking to sensation (157) and, again, this is what Brennan means by the intelligence of the flesh.³¹ It requires, too, a conscious awareness of the myriad ways in which we are affectively and energetically connected to the other and to the living world. In essence Brennan is clear that this "shift downward into the physical", or the material, leads us back to where philosophy, in the West, begins (163).³² This arguably elemental practice provides us with a future philosophy or ethics—an attentive awareness of the delicate web of self, other, and world.

³⁰ We can think of Simone Weil's work on attention and grace alongside Brennan's work on attention and discernment (Weil 1951, 1995, 2002). See my discussion of their relation in *Slow Philosophy* (Boulous Walker 2017, pp. 180–82).

³¹ Brennan refers to the "resurrection of the body" and by this she means attention to the senses in order to extend conscious understanding (159).

³² "Then we will know how the form-giving capacity inheres in the very nature of energetic matter, now as it always has done. We will feel it and know in a united body and soul that the matrix was never, and is never, passive; it is simultaneously active and receptive, intelligent and substantial, as giver of life" (163).

Brennan's gesture back to the origins of philosophy in the West is important and this has much to do with restrictive modes of modern thought. The contained subject—the individual imagining itself as isolated from affective relations with others—is the same subject who inhabits a certain mode of modern philosophical work. Emmanuel Levinas has spoken of this, reminding us of the violence of a coercive reason, where philosophy risks incorporating its other (and the other's otherness) into the Same. Philosophy reduces its subject to an object and contains by assimilation—reducing the foreignness of the other to its own self-knowledge and understanding. For Levinas, in its negative forms, the reasoning will risks appropriating the other and thus foreclosing any understanding of the intricate intersubjective bond. He writes of: “[T]he notion of an intellectual activity or of a reasoning will—a way of doing something which consists precisely of thinking through knowing, of seizing something and making it one's own . . . an activity which appropriates and grasps the otherness of the known. A certain grasp . . . Knowledge as perception, concept, comprehension, refers back to an act of grasping” (Levinas 1989, p. 76).

We can think of Levinas's point here in terms of the violence of the modern ego, indeed in terms of certain forms of philosophy *as* negative affect. If we do so, then this raises the question of philosophy's suitability to explore and account for the transmission of affect—or, at least the suitability of a certain form of philosophical work to do so. Is Brennan in danger of working within a tradition that paradoxically reinforces the very forms of subjectivity and knowledge she hopes to challenge? Is there a risk that her philosophical gesture will echo philosophy's appropriation of the other? Interestingly, Cixous warns: “philosophy has always wanted to think its other, to interiorize, to incorporate it. From the moment it thinks its other, the other is no longer the other but becomes the same” (Cixous 1992, p. 90).³³ Brennan is, I think, well aware of the risks of philosophy in its more restricted forms, in its less than ethical modes. She is aware, too, of those important moments throughout the history of philosophy in the West, when philosophers speak across the chasm that separates self from other, undoing the negative affect of projection that keeps the two apart. Although Brennan mentions Levinas's philosophy only once, and in passing (Brennan 2004, pp. 194–5 n. 2), we can say that his philosophy engenders the kind of noncoercive sweet reason or the soft voice of reason that Brennan applauds (Brennan 2004, p. 138).

While Brennan's gesture might well risk echoing philosophy's assimilation of the other, I would argue that she escapes this fate by writing on the borders between philosophy and two of its most notorious “others”—psychoanalysis and feminism. These practices offer Brennan the opportunity to shift terrain and modify her “philosophical” gesture, i.e., to stop short of simply theorizing or incorporating affect. In effect, these practices provide her with a passageway to the domains of literature and writing. They provide her a passageway to an arguably more nuanced exploration of affect, one that I think we can better appreciate by considering Cixous's work on porosity, vulnerability, and writing.

6. Reading Brennan with Cixous

In the introduction to this paper, I noted that Cixous's work on the *entre deux* relation explores the space of vulnerability between self and other (Cixous 2006). Briefly, now, I would like to conclude by offering a few thoughts on how we might think of her focus on the vulnerable relation in terms of Brennan's work on the transmission of affect, and by emphasizing that Cixous's work transfers this focus on our porosity toward the fields of literature and writing. Why is this significant? Because Brennan argues for the importance of language and words to symbolize the protective attitude of thoughtfulness. She reminds us that discernment works, in large part, by providing words for the

³³ Cixous's relations with both philosophy and “writing” are complex. Throughout her work, she “moves between philosophy and poetry, while remaining unfaithful to both” so as to draw our attention to the limitations of a strictly bordered and conceptual discourse reduced to the functions of naming and concluding (Buys and Polatinsky 2009, pp. 79–80).

expression of the senses, articulating feelings, naming sensations, adducing reasons: “this, precisely, requires a vocabulary; [and] this is why we defined feelings as sensations that have found a match in words” (Brennan 2004, p. 120). Cixous’s work on writing and literature provides this ethical vocabulary, words to help us chart our way through the complex modes of intersubjective exchange. Words to encounter otherness in intense and intimate ways. Words that affect us bodily, opening us to the other in vital and energetic ways. This is helpful because Brennan calls for us to invent or reinvent a language appropriate to the intelligence of the flesh (a discerning language), so as to connect sensation, word, and affect:

“conscious consciousness is only possible when we invent or reinvent the words to say it. The transliteration into language from the minutia of sensory knowledge and its sifting may be processes entirely unknown to consciousness at present; the lifting of affective and projected judgments may be felt only as a sense of openness to others and a renewed ability to learn, but it marks the beginning of something more. Extending conscious sensation, finding the words or images, means grasping the nuances of fleshly grammar and alphabets. It means describing and accounting for those sensations, which entails *translating them into the everyday currencies of speech* and so extending the range of their visualization”. (Brennan 2004, 155 emphasis added)

Cixous offers us such a translation for the everyday. Throughout her work, she examines the ways that writing encodes the intensities in our affective relations, offering us both a record of these intensities, and a process that links to (and symbolizes) what Brennan refers to as discernment. For Cixous, writing and literature are the places of the unfolding of a vulnerability to the other—a revelation of that vulnerability. We can, I think, suggest that Brennan’s ethical account of the affective and energetic connection between self and other is, essentially, an account of the consequences of what Cixous refers to as our porosity. Simply put, I am vulnerable to your projections, as you are to mine. I am open to you, as you are to me. But what is the nature of the porosity that Cixous explores? What does it mean to say that the porous space between self and other (the *entre deux*) is characterised in terms of a potential danger?

To understand the kind of vulnerability that Cixous explores in her writing, we need to acknowledge the different way she frames the relation binding self with other. Throughout her work, she emphasizes an extreme ambiguity in this relation at odds with more singularly hostile Hegelian accounts of intersubjectivity.³⁴ For Cixous, the ambiguous nature of our being involves a complex dialectic between intimacy and threat, one that opens us to the possibility of risk. Indeed, in her work *Stigmata*, Cixous explores the intricate connections between vulnerability and wounding. Here, she argues that writing allows us to bypass our defenses in order to reach inside the open wound we carry as a result of our vulnerable opening to the other. Writing permits us something like a fearless access to the totally foreign sense of the other (Cixous 1998).³⁵ What is ambiguous in this account, is the sense in which vulnerability channels a relational and life-affirming connection with the other, while simultaneously acknowledging the possibility of threat and violence. As such, writing, like vulnerability itself, is understood—at its best—as a transformative experience opening us to the full complexity of our porous being. In writing we encounter the wound and the scar. In *The Day I Wasn’t There*, Cixous writes: “With my mouth open and all my teeth gleaming on display I was like a wound that I kept reopening even when I wanted so badly for the scar to heal. My smilingness was beyond my control . . . ” (Cixous 2006, p. 15). Cixous links the wound, porosity, and an excessive receptivity with the confining and enveloping context of the other:

³⁴ Cixous claims that the Hegelian other is simultaneously both hostile and distant, threatening the self with loss—the loss of property, prestige, freedom and, potentially, life (Cixous 1981, pp. 48–50).

³⁵ For a discussion of the relation between vulnerability and wounding, see Gilson (2011).

“It’s this human porosity that bothers me and I can’t escape since it is the fault of my skin, the extra sense which is everywhere in my being, this lack of eyelids on the face of the soul, or perhaps this imaginary lack of imaginary lids, this excessive facility I have for catching others, I am caught by persons or things animated or unanimated that I don’t even frequent, and even the verb to *catch* I catch or rather I am caught by it, for, note this phrase, it’s not I who wish to change, it’s the other who gets his hooks in me for lack of armour”. (Cixous 2006, p. 18)

Throughout her work Cixous charts the play between a destructive force and a regenerative openness in the ethical and literary spaces of the *entre deux*. It is this play (between destruction and regeneration) that marks the space as vulnerable—open to a porous longing between self and other.³⁶ As we have seen, the *entre deux* is, for Cixous, the space of a profound ambiguity (Boon 2013, p. 86) enabling an ethical encounter (or staging of otherness) between self and other to take place. This encounter is simultaneously both intimate and threatening, because the self is open and vulnerable to “the horrifying Other”—to difference. While vulnerability is typically characterized as a liability, a trembling, or a weakness (Boon 2013, p. 85),³⁷ Cixous’s work offers a more nuanced account of susceptibility as a “wounding”, one that hovers between horror *and* regeneration. As such, the porosity that makes me vulnerable to the other does not in any simple sense result in a solely destructive outcome (Boon 2013, p. 86). As Cixous says, “one can think loss other than in the negative” (Cixous 1992, p. 67). One can, as well, think vulnerability other than in the negative. The porosity (permeability, penetrability) that exists between me and the other is the possibility of my openness to the other and to the world, and this can be for better or for worse (Cixous 2006). This kind of vulnerability involves an “active and ongoing engagement” with danger (Boon 2013, p. 85), a dangerous porosity that is simultaneously intimate (opening) and threatening (foreclosing).³⁸ We can, with care and some hesitation, understand this ambiguous vulnerability in terms of the distinction Brennan draws between living attention and negative affect. Cixous’s play between opening and foreclosing traces an arc similar to the one drawn between Brennan’s discerning ability to simultaneously detach and embrace the affect. As such, Cixous’s work permits us to think of Brennan’s transmission of affect as the ambiguous site of a vulnerability that moves energetically and porously between a susceptibility to wounding (and an ability to wound) and a life-affirming opening to the other; it is a longing that literally transforms. In this sense, Cixous’s porous self provides a counter to the “contained-self” we have seen Brennan identify in the founding fantasy, thus claiming allegiance with the intelligence of the flesh. Cixous’s self speaks to Brennan’s “Other I” or “Discerning I”, the fully conscious consciousness of living attention and love. And it does so through writing.

Writing toward the other establishes a body-to-body passageway (a porosity) between the self and the other, one that Cixous claims as transformative. Writing is “the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me—the other that I am and am not, that I don’t know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live—that tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me” (Cixous 1986, p. 85). Writing is, to use Brennan’s terminology, a kind of discernment in practice, a

³⁶ Sonja Boon charts the importance of longing and intimacy alongside the “threatening encounter with a horrifying Other” throughout Cixous’s work (Boon 2013, p. 85). Boon’s analysis provides an insightful perspective on the significance of vulnerability and wounding in both the structure and meaning of Cixous’s works. She notes that “while vulnerability may well be an opening, a wound, a stigma, Cixous’s interest lies in our *response* to this wounding: do we close it up, sewing it tightly together to avoid any possibility of contagion? Or do we allow the wound to blossom, opening ourselves to new encounters and new possibilities, however joyous or painful they might be? In this way, Cixous suggests the necessity of considering vulnerability—as porosity—as both a point of horror *and* a promise of regeneration” (Boon 2013, p. 86). In this regard, Boon explores the “haunted” porosity of Cixous’s book, *The Day I Wasn’t There* [2006], in terms of “the longing that must remain eternally unassuaged” (Boon 2013, p. 87).

³⁷ Cavarero (2011, pp. 30–31) rejects the equation of vulnerability with helplessness, arguing that while we can move beyond helplessness, our vulnerability remains with us throughout our lives. For a discussion of Cavarero’s distinction, see Drichel (2013, pp. 3–4).

³⁸ While the *entre deux* entails the play between opening and foreclosing, Boon observes that in *The Day I Wasn’t There* it becomes, at times, “a space of undoing rather than foreclosure” (Boon 2013, p. 94).

giving and a generosity that mirrors Brennan's acts of kindness and love. Indeed, for Cixous, writing is foremost a gift—a feminine gift of grace, orienting the one who writes towards life and the preservation of life (Sellers 1996, p. xiii). It is an act of generosity that acknowledges our debt to life. Writing establishes an intimacy and openness with the other that propels us beyond our limits towards a transformative future. Writing involves patience and waiting, a movement toward the other in passion and in grace.

In Cixous's early essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa", she already engages a positive account of porosity, one that explores the living boundaries of the other. Here, she characterizes writing as an in-between that passes *entre deux*—an undoing of the work of death:

"To admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death—to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. A process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other: a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between . . . ". (Cixous 1976, p. 883)

If we were to ask what writing does, Cixous would remind us that it opens us to the other and thus to risk. Writing opens us to "the risk of *other*, of difference, without feeling threatened by the existence of an otherness, rather, delighting to increase through the unknown that there is to discover, to respect, to favor, to cherish" (Cixous 1986, p. 78). In risk, writing symbolizes and gives voice to our vulnerable selves, our porous selves. While it gives voice to our vulnerable and porous selves, writing is itself vulnerable and porous. Writing detours from the concept in order to be. In writing, Cixous's vulnerable and open self, counters the "ego consciousness" that we have seen Brennan depict in terms of self-preservation and self-interest. Her "self" attends and receives, slowly approaching the other with an effort that undoes the ego with its "pretense of mastering things and knowing things" (Cixous 1987, p. 20). For Cixous's self, approaching the other involves the "tender attentiveness of slowness" (Cixous 1991, p. 65), an intimacy that unfolds in infinite time (Cixous 1992, p. 3). Slowness founds the ethical relation with the other, and Cixous grounds this slowness in writing—a practice that has the ability to transport us to unfamiliar terrain (Boulous Walker 2017, p. 156) and to open us "onto the infinite registers of the other" (Cixous 1992, p. 135). Indeed, Cixous thinks of her own writing as a kind of attention, a writing by "[s]he who looks with the look that recognizes, that studies, respects, doesn't take, doesn't claw, but attentively, with gentle relentlessness, contemplates and reads, caresses, bathes, makes the other gleam" (Cixous 1991, p. 51). This ability to make the other gleam captures something of Brennan's focus on discernment, kindness, and love. While Brennan focusses on philosophy as an ethical passage toward the other, Cixous explores writing as a privileged form of this ethics. Why read Cixous with Brennan? Because Cixous understands that in writing, we begin the delicate task of inventing a vocabulary for the exploration of discernment, the protective attitude of thoughtfulness that connects our thinking with sensation, thus opening us to the other in hopeful and optimistic ways.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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