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Marta Segarra

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Derrida, Cixous, and (Feminine) Writing

Marta Segarra

Jacques Derrida's thinking on literature and writing was nourished by his close friendship, since the early sixties, with the writer, theorist, and playwright Hélène Cixous. The philosopher was, admittedly, the first reader of Cixous's writings, and she also had access to Derrida's texts before their publication, as shown by the multiple, although sometimes well hidden, cross-references and "counter-signatures" that can be found in their respective works.¹ Both have publicly recalled their first discussion, in which the rising philosopher who was Derrida, awestricken by the novelty and powerful appeal of the young writer's still undisclosed pieces of writing, encouraged Cixous to publish them and to pursue her literary endeavor.

In the following years, while Jacques Derrida's first seminal books appeared, Hélène Cixous became a renowned and awarded writer: she was granted the Prix Medicis in 1969 for *Dedans*,² a "novel" (although she finally preferred to call her narrative works "fictions", a term that suits better than "novels" these *transgenre* texts). At this time, Derrida was fully engaged in building a complex philosophical oeuvre, whereas Cixous regularly published highly literary texts, but also pieces of literary criticism, in academic journals as well as in newspapers such as *Le Monde*, mostly on anglophone writers: James Joyce (to which she devoted her PhD, published in 1968³), Ezra Pound, Lewis Carroll, William Golding, Iris Murdoch or Muriel Spark, among others. This

¹ This mutual reading and influence has been analyzed by a number of critics, and in an especially detailed and subtle way by Ginette Michaud, who devoted two volumes to this analysis: *Battements du secret littéraire: Lire Jacques Derrida et Hélène Cixous, vol. 1* (Paris: Hermann, 2010); and *"Comme en rêve": Lire Jacques Derrida et Hélène Cixous, vol. 2* (Paris: Hermann, 2010).

² Hélène Cixous, *Inside*, trans. Carol Barko (New York: Schocken Books, 1986).

³ Hélène Cixous, *L'Exil de James Joyce ou l'art du remplacement* (Paris: Grasset & Publications de la Faculté des lettres et sciences de Paris-Sorbonne, 1968).

distinction between *philosophy-theory* and *literature-criticism* was progressively blurred in the work both by Derrida and by Cixous—and, especially, in the reception of their work—, although one may argue that Derrida had always been interested in literature and Cixous in philosophy/theory.⁴

The mutual impregnation of ideas and images became conspicuous after the publication of *Veils* in 1998,⁵ a volume which gathers a text by Cixous (“Savoir”) and one by Derrida (“A Silkworm of One’s Own”). *Veils* opened the path⁶ to a sort of public “correspondence”, an exchange of book-length essays: Jacques Derrida paid homage to Hélène Cixous in *H.C. For Life, That is to Say...* (2000)⁷ and in *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive* (2003),⁸ while she responded in *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint* (2001)⁹ and *Insister of Jacques Derrida* (2006),¹⁰ among other shorter texts, more numerous after Derrida’s passing in 2004.

⁴ A condensed account of Derrida’s relation to literature can be found in Joseph Hillis Miller, “Derrida and literature,” in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 58-81. As for Cixous’s relation to philosophy and theory, see Peggy Kamuf, “To Give Place: Semi-Approaches to Hélène Cixous,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 87 (1995): 68-89; and Mairéad Hanrahan, *Cixous’s Semi-Fictions: Thinking at the Borders of Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

⁵ Hélène Cixous, *Veils*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁶ In fact, this public exchange had begun earlier, with the conference in 1990 and subsequent collection of papers, *Lectures de la différence sexuelle*, ed. Mara Negrón (Paris: Des femmes–Antoinette Fouque, 1994), which featured Cixous’s paper, “Contes de la différence sexuelle” [“Tales of Sexual Difference”, trans. Eric Prenowitz, a fragment of which was included in *The Portable Cixous*, ed. Marta Segarra (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 48-60], and Jacques Derrida’s, “Fourmis” [“Ants,” trans. Eric Prenowitz, *The Oxford Literary Review* 24 (2002): 17-42].

⁷ See Jacques Derrida, *H.C. For Life, That is to Say...*, trans. Laurent Milesi & Stefan Herbrecter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius. The Secrets of the Archive*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁹ See Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ See Hélène Cixous, *Insister of Jacques Derrida*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

However, the intellectual exchange between Derrida and Cixous, which sometimes succeeds in obscuring precedence in the use they make of the same images or coined words (such as *nostalgérie*, *algériance*, *animot...*), began much earlier than this 1998 intellectual coming out. For instance, while a pivotal concept in Derrida's thinking, since his very first works, is "writing", Cixous, for her part, launched the notion of "feminine writing", in an article that has become her most popular text, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975).¹¹

By this expression, "feminine writing", Hélène Cixous did not refer to "women's writing"—as some readers, still today, misunderstand it—nor to a specific way in which women would write, a set of traits that would encompass texts written by women in a special field, which could even be considered a *ghetto*, within "literature".¹² "Feminine writing" would, instead, stand as an alternative of mainstream writing, which "has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy".¹³ In other words, most of the texts that form what is called "literature" are, for Cixous,—in the Derridean idiom—"phallogocentric"; only some "poets" engage in a "feminine practice of writing".¹⁴ This practice is difficult to describe, and doing that would entail a regrettable oversimplification of the notion; through the examples given by Cixous, which range from Heinrich von Kleist to Marguerite Duras, Jean Genet or Clarice Lispector, the reader understands that this is not (only) a "modern"—nor a "postmodern" or avant-garde—writing, and that "feminine writing" does not correspond to a precise "style".

¹¹ First published in French in *L'Arc*, no. 61 (1975): 39-54; translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 875-893.

¹² For a brief insight on what "feminine writing" is and is not, see Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, "L'invention de l'écriture féminine," *Le Magazine littéraire* (April 2016): 83. For a longer account on this notion, see the chapter "Feminine Writing" in Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum Press, 2004), 16-34.

¹³ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 879.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 883.

In fact, “feminine writing” and “style”, a term rejected by both Cixous and Derrida, would be poles apart. In *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles* (1978),¹⁵ the philosopher considers “style” as a “phallogentric” category, since it is associated with a violent penetration or incision, marking the author’s mastery over his work. On the contrary, in order that “events” take place in language, “one must give up on performative authority”, says Derrida.¹⁶ Cixous adheres to the same view, saying that the author must not be the “pilot” in the journey of writing, but must “submit” to the power of language.¹⁷ This shared conception of language and writing shows that, for both Derrida and Cixous, who have been associated to postmodern *style* due to an intensive use of signifiers’ versatility and possibilities, this apparently playful use of language cannot be equated to simple word-play but, more accurately, to a very serious quest for meaning and *truth*.

However, their conception of literature seems to slightly differ: if Derrida seemingly considers literature as an essentially modern practice that deals with ethical and political questions that inform his own philosophical reflection, for Cixous literature is a space outside historical time: she treats on equal terms Sophocles, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Proust, or Lispector: all of them are her kin (“parents, friends, ancestors”¹⁸) and her “contemporaries”. Language, as if it were a living being, keeps memory of all the “resources” that these “poets” brought to life through their writing; an author is thus compared to a midwife, or else to a witness of this “coming to writing”¹⁹ of language itself. That is why “writing” cannot be defined by a set of “properties”, nor is ever

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles/Éperons: Les styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979).

¹⁶ Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, *Lengua por venir/Langue à venir. Seminario de Barcelona* (Barcelona: Icaria, 2004), 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 80.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 81

¹⁹ Hélène Cixous, “*Coming to Writing*” and *Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson, trans. Sarah Cornell et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). For the French original edition, see *La Venue à l’écriture*, with Madeleine Gagnon and Annie Leclerc (Paris: U.G.E., 1977).

“proper” to its author as “style” would be, but on the contrary, it consists of “what cannot be reappropriated”, in Derrida’s words.²⁰

For Cixous, then, literature has nothing to do with modernism as a historical period, or with the modern era in historical terms: literature consists of the eternal return to the same original “wounds”, which shout powerful cries,²¹ in ancient Greek tragedy and in *Roland’s Song*, Kafka’s short stories, or Tsvetaieva’s poems. That does not mean at all that Cixous is blind to the historical and political context of literary works: her account of her painful and at the same time pleasurable reading of *Roland’s Song* in colonial Algeria,²² in a time when the fight between “Moors” and “Christians” was reenacted by the first manifestations of the Algerian struggle for independence and its fierce French repression, reveals her awareness of the political implications of literary *masterpieces*; this consciousness—and her own political texts, especially as playwright²³—refute the apparent immanence of her readings.

Moreover, the image of the wound that Cixous repeatedly uses referring to literature or, more precisely, to the act of writing, sheds light on the meaning of an expression that has been often used to characterize “feminine writing”, that is, “writing (with) the body”. Again, this perspective on writing has been criticized as essentialist, assuming that this sort of writing is “feminine” since “women” are closer to “nature”, hence to their bodies, than “men”, and also more “open to the other”, to alterity, especially

²⁰ Cixous and Derrida, *Lengua por venir/Langue à venir*, 78.

²¹ See Hélène Cixous, *Ayā! Le cri de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2013), a forceful and very poetic manifesto for literature. [“Ay yay! The Cry of Literature”, trans. Eric Prenowitz, in *Ways of Re-Thinking Literature*, eds. Tom Bishop and Donatien Grau (New York and London: Routledge, forthcoming 2018)].

²² See Hélène Cixous, *So Close*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, (2007) 2009), 65-69.

²³ Cixous’s plays for the Théâtre du Soleil have always tackled contemporary and sometimes highly sensitive political issues, such as the HIV-contaminated blood scandal that took place in France in the 1990, in *The Perjured City, or the Awakening of the Furies* (1994), trans. Bernadette Fort, in *Selected Plays of Hélène Cixous*, ed. Eric Prenowitz (London: Routledge, 2004).

through maternity. However, if we understand “feminine” as a “libidinal” position, as Cixous, and not as an essence of actual women, this *body-writing* cannot exclusively be associated to women. The frequent assimilation that readers made between “feminine” and “women” led Cixous, nonetheless, to later drop the adjective, and to refer only to “writing”.

In fact, “writing with the body” or, more broadly, (feminine) writing, might be assimilated to a performative writing that not only thematizes the body in unusual ways in literary tradition, but *writes the body*, inscribing it in the text. Cixous thinks that Derrida achieves this kind of writing in *Circumfession*,²⁴ a semi-autobiographical text, of which she states: “I think that Derrida [...] is one of the rare ‘men’, or perhaps the only one, to risk his active body in the text. A body movement on the order of circling around inscribes and is inscribed in *Circumfession*. You yourself [she addresses Derrida] circle around this real and metaphorical penis, this blinded, wounded, healed, resuscitated, etc, penis, you circle around this sex”.²⁵ Circumcision is, in Derrida’s text, not only a biographical memory inscribed in his own body, but *at the same time* a metaphor, a lever to thinking on a wide range of topics such as the place of the subject in the community, Judaism as a heritage, the opening of the self to the other, desire and sexuality, among others.

“To risk” the writer’s own “active body in the text” may also be considered an ethical engagement, which has frequently been related to a feminist way of writing, at least as it was undertaken by some women writers, Cixous among them, in France at the time of the MLF, the 1970s. “The Laugh of the Medusa”’s famous assertion, “Let the priests

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession*, in *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

²⁵ Cixous, “Tales of Sexual Difference,” 53-54.

tremble: we're going to show them our sexts!"²⁶—which was at the origin of Nancy Spero's installation that bears this title (1998)—, clearly shows that this performative poetics is also a "poethics".²⁷

However, this engagement concerns reading as well as writing. A "feminine reading" would thus be the logical counterpart to "feminine writing". But, since Cixous does not make a difference between reading and writing—she coins the term "readwriting"²⁸ in order to show this continuity—, there was no need for her to use this adjective related to reading. Cixous conceives reading as a bodily experience too, comparing it to a "wound"²⁹ that opens the reader's body: this body loses its closure in order to welcome *the other*, conveyed by literature. This opening might also be identified to the "feminine" in *feminine readwriting*.

This hospitality to the "wholly other" coincides, moreover, with Derrida's conception of literary works, according to J. Hillis Miller, since this type of texts allow the "invention of the impossible"—of what was thought to be impossible—, giving place to "events" that, by definition, were not planned by the author.³⁰ (Feminine) readwriting, as it has been defined above, would thus be characterized by its "opening, destabilizing language",³¹ which amounts to destabilizing the subject that produces—and reads—this text.

²⁶ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 885.

²⁷ See, for instance: Adele Parker, "Living Writing: The Poethics of Hélène Cixous," *Postmodern Culture* 9, no. 2 (1999): #-#. Morag Schiach's title, *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) is also significant in this sense.

²⁸ "*Lirécrire*" appears in several works by Cixous, such as *Philippines* (2009), trans. Laurent Milesi (New York: Polity, 2011).

²⁹ Cixous, *So Close*, 67.

³⁰ Miller, "Derrida and Literature," 69.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Hence, literature plays a key role in the “Humanities to come,”³² as dreamt by Derrida in “The Future of the Profession or the University without Condition.”³³ Although these “Humanities of tomorrow” should intertwine several disciplines, including law and philosophy, literature would have a privileged place in them, since the reference to public space “is also what fundamentally links the university, and above all the Humanities, to what is called literature, in the European and modern sense of the term, as the right to say everything publicly, or to keep it secret, if only in the form of fiction.”³⁴ This “assumed freedom to say everything in the public space” has as its ambitious goal, that of “re-thinking the concept of man, the figure of humanity in general,”³⁵ by deconstructing what is considered “proper to man”, the “humanity of man,”³⁶ and in particular the “traditional opposition” between “man” and “animal.”³⁷

Derrida claims that all the answers given to the question of what is proper to man (of which he provides a list in another text: “speech, reason, experience of death, mourning, culture, institution, politics, technique, clothing, lying, feigned feint, effacement of the trace, gift, laughter, tears, respect, etc.”³⁸) would not withstand “a consistent scientific and deconstructive analysis.”³⁹ Significantly for our argument, most of the elements of this list have to do with language and speech, associated to logocentrism and to the distinction between constative and performative speech acts, a distinction that Derrida

³² See Tom Cohen’s introduction to *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities*, 1-23.

³³ Jacques Derrida, “The future of the profession or the university without condition (thanks to the ‘Humanities’, what could take place tomorrow”, in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities*, 24-57.

³⁴ Ibid, 27.

³⁵ Ibid, 29.

³⁶ Ibid, 32.

³⁷ Ibid, 51.

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet & Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, vol. 1 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 130.

³⁹ Derrida, “The future of the profession...”, 51.

also problematizes. He posits, thus, that speech is not proper to human beings, or, more precisely:

The idea according to which man is the only speaking being [...] seems to me at once undisplaceable and highly problematic. Of course, if one defines language in such a way that it is reserved for what we call man, what is there to say? But if one reinscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes. I am thinking in particular of the mark in general, of the trace, of iterability, of *différance*. These possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language, are themselves not only human.⁴⁰

Therefore, the deconstruction of the radical distinction between human and nonhuman animals links, quite paradoxically, the continuity of what is usually thought as a radical divide between different species and even categories of living beings to one of the traits that seem more exclusive to humans, speech and “writing”, if we understand the latter as “an exemplary case of what Derrida means by ‘text’ or ‘trace’”.⁴¹ Judith Butler also offers an enlightening account of Derrida’s conception of “writing”, in relation to the divide human/animal:

Writing understood in this way is not a degraded version of speech, but offers a non anthropocentric way of understanding language by virtue of its distinction from speech. It opens up a version of language in which the decentred subject registers a form of humility. [...] Does writing, in other words, conduct a critique of anthropocentrism, its ties to onto-theology, and their common dream of

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Eating Well or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 116.

⁴¹ J. Hillis Miller, “Derrida and Literature”, 73.

mastery?⁴²

This destabilization of the subject is the starting point of “Eating Well or the Calculation of the Subject” (1988), a dialogue between Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy. Derrida, however, objects to the question (“Who comes after the subject?”) that triggers his response since, for him, this formulation implies that the subject has “simply” been “liquidated”⁴³ by what could be called postmodern or post-metaphysic thinking. Derrida postulates instead that 20th-century epistemologies preceding deconstruction (he mentions Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, and some of the thinkers on whom they rely: Freud, Marx, Nietzsche) did not pretend to eliminate the subject (or the *human*, as we shall see) but that they “reinterpreted, displaced, decentered, re-inscribed, then” this subject.⁴⁴ Nancy accordingly reformulates the question, which becomes, instead of “Who comes after the subject?”, “What is the place of the subject?”⁴⁵

To this second query, Derrida had cunningly responded in a previous interview with Christie McDonald, entitled “Choreographies”.⁴⁶ Having been asked about the “woman’s place”, the philosopher concludes that this question should not be formulated in this way, contrary to what “‘reactive’ feminism”—a feminism that fights to *place* women in the same situation or position than men—thinks. Derrida (and there is little doubt that he is influenced here by Cixous’s complex and nuanced position about feminism) chooses to “challenge a certain idea of the *locus* [lieu] and the place [*place*]”, a certain “topography” proper to Western metaphysics, which goes along with the idea of “progress”.⁴⁷

⁴² Judith Butler, introduction to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), xv.

⁴³ Derrida, “Eating Well or the Calculation of the Subject”, 96.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Derrida, “Choreographies,” *Diacritics* 12, no. 2 (1982): 66-76.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

Applied to the “subject”, this deconstruction of “topography” would *open* the subject, depriving it from its “unity”, “its qualities of stance or stability, [...] everything that links the ‘subject’ to conscience, to humanity, to history.”⁴⁸ Following this conception of the subject, “the relation to self [...] can only be *différance*, that is to say alterity, or trace.”⁴⁹ The “who” (of “Who comes after the subject?”) who comes in the place of the “classical” subject is not, for Derrida, bound to be *only* human. “Responsibility”, which underlies “metaphysics of subjectivity”, is not exclusive to *man*.⁵⁰ Responsibility is also intimately linked to language and speech, since it can be read, following Donna J. Haraway,⁵¹ as *response-ability*, the capacity to respond to the call of the other.

For his part, Jean-Luc Nancy also associates the question of the subject with language and, more precisely, with writing, suggesting that, rather than reflecting on the subject’s “place”, one should maybe think on the subject itself as a “place of passage”, “like the writer for Blanchot.”⁵² Derrida accepts this proposition, specifying that “text” or “writing”, in the sense that he gives to these terms, may be identified, rather than to a “place”, to “an instance (without stance, a ‘without’ without negativity) for [...] a ‘who’ besieged by the problematic of the trace and of *différance*.”⁵³

As for Cixous, she prefers to call “poetry” this “writing” that connects the self with the radical other, as she poetically recounts in a text that is entitled (almost) after a cat, *Messie* (1996).⁵⁴ Its narrator faces the challenge of communicating *by telephone* with her cat (who belongs “to a race which cannot talk long distance”), since “all mammals

⁴⁸ Derrida, “Eating Well or the Calculation of the Subject,” 99.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 100.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 101.

⁵¹ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2007).

⁵² Derrida, “Eating Well or the Calculation of the Subject,” 99.

⁵³ Ibid, 99-100.

⁵⁴ Hélène Cixous, *Messie* (Paris: Des femmes–Antoinette Fouque, 1996). Partial English translation by Beverley Bie Brahic in *The Portable Cixous*, 165-172 (all the quotations in this paragraph come from p. 172 in this edition).

bear a trace of the first telephone cord”. The solution they both found is to “telephone in person. So several times a day she comes to give me a little telephone call on the leg, using her own body briefly as apparatus, for the number she rubs”. The aporetic images of the telephone cord—which associates a bodily link (the umbilical cord) with the physical distance of the tele-phone—, and of telephoning “in person”, by touch, allude to “(feminine) writing” as it has been described above.⁵⁵ This also called “body-writing” is thus characterized by an “almost-touching” approach to the objects of writing, as Cixous herself described in Clarice Lispector’s texts.⁵⁶

The deconstruction of the “classical subject” accomplished by writing reveals furthermore the deep connection that this subject keeps with what Derrida calls a “*sacrificial* structure”, based on the presumption that the radical divide between humans and animals allow the first to a “noncriminal putting to death” of the latter.⁵⁷ The subject “does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh,”⁵⁸ as a “symbolic operation” but also as a “real” one when he eats animal meat: “the idealizing interiorization of the phallus and the necessity of its passage through the mouth, whether it’s a matter of words or of things, of sentences, of daily bread or wine, of the tongue, the lips, or the breast of the other.”⁵⁹ This conception of the subject, which Derrida assimilates to the “virile figure,” is thus based on “*carno-phallogocentrism*.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ See also Joana Masó, “*So Close* and Other Essays: On Hélène Cixous’s writing,” *philoSOPHIA* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 131-144, for an account of an approach to objects in Cixous’s writing that conciliates distance and closeness.

⁵⁶ See Hélène Cixous, *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, ed. and trans. Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

⁵⁷ Derrida, “Eating Well or the Calculation of the Subject,” 112.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 114.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 112-113.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 113-114.

This association between carnivorism and phallogocentrism brings us back to the intimate relationship between Hélène Cixous's and Derrida's texts. Take, for instance, a passage in one of the latest books by Cixous, *Les Sans Arche* (2018), in which she comments on a video by Algerian-born artist Adel Abdessemed, entitled "Lise". We see in it a young woman breastfeeding a piglet, a scene that shocked many spectators.⁶¹ This scene is disturbing not only because it blurs the stable border between humans and animals, but also and foremost because it alludes to birth and the mother-infant relation. For the immense majority of people, animals "are not part of the family", and thinking differently amounts to endangering "the world's order, this order that distinguishes the eaters from the eaten, like the masters from the slaves. Resuscitating meat into baby disturbs consumers", says Cixous, adding that this is a scene where "one does not think, does not calculate [in contrast with the "calculation of the subject"]", one touches the other's body one only gives, and one loves-the-other-as-oneself".⁶² Breastfeeding, as an intimate contact between mother and infant that blurs the border between their two bodies, but also as an act of nourishing the other, suggests that there may be not only friendship and affection or even love between a non-human and a human animal, but also a *biological kinship*.

Moreover, and above all, Abdessemed's video, and Cixous's text on it, reverse the "passage through the mouth" of "the breast of the other,"⁶³ thus blowing up the carnophallogocentric structure that underlies the subject "sacrificial structure". This is done, in both works, through what Derrida, elaborating on Kant, calls "the strange

⁶¹ Especially when it was shown in an exhibit that took place in a French catholic church and related to Renaissance paintings depicting a Madonna breastfeeding Jesus. (Nuit Blanche Mayenne, October 2013: <http://www.nuitblanche-mayenne.com/2013/adelabdessemed.html>; see also: <https://www.christianophobie.fr/breves/mayenne-labomination-dans-la-basilique-notre-dame>).

⁶² Hélène Cixous, *Les Sans Arche* (Paris: Gallimard, forthcoming March 2018).

⁶³ Derrida, "Eating Well or the Calculation of the Subject," 113.

modality of the ‘as if,’”⁶⁴ which is proper to “the modern institution named literature” and “its links to fiction,”⁶⁵ in contrast with the “as such”, “whose authority founds and justifies every ontology as well as every phenomenology, every philosophy as science or knowledge.”⁶⁶ But of course, Derrida problematizes what might otherwise seem a facile distinction between “philosophy” or “science” and “literature” or “art”, namely the “precious distinction between performative acts and constative acts,”⁶⁷ or the discrepancy between philosophy as the *place of truth* and literature as *fiction*.

Both Cixous’s and Abdessemed’s works are, thus, powerful “cries”.⁶⁸ In Cixous’s words, speaking of Abdessemed, they do not “make discourses, an image takes flight [...] Before theory. Before the thing is fixed in theorem. / The body is still warm”.⁶⁹ The last sentence is especially compelling since it also alludes to dead or about-to-die animals, featured in Abdessemed’s work. Its meaning is thus literal as well as metaphorical, also conjoining the constative and the performative. We could thus conclude that, by virtue of “the performative force of the ‘as if’”⁷⁰ informing “poetry” or “writing” (in visual arts as in literature), Abdessemed’s film, as well as Cixous’s text building on it, achieve “the sacrifice of sacrifice” that philosophers such as Heidegger or Levinas, in spite of their powerful displacement of the “classical subject”, did not accomplish, according to Derrida.⁷¹ Writing, in the broad and at the same time specific

⁶⁴ Derrida, “The future of the profession...”, 39.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 52.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 53.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 52,

⁶⁸ Cixous, “Ay yay! The Cry of Literature”.

⁶⁹ Cixous, *Les Sans Arche*.

⁷⁰ Derrida, “The future of the profession...”, 52.

⁷¹ “Discourses as original as those of Heidegger and Levinas disrupt, of course, a certain traditional humanism. In spite of the differences separating them, they nonetheless remain profound humanisms *to the extent that they do not sacrifice sacrifice*.” Derrida, “Eating Well or the Calculation of the Subject,” 113; emphasis in the original.

sense that both Derrida and Cixous give to the term, would therefore be a unique way—maybe the best or even the only one—to make “deconstruction” arrive.

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