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## Hélène Cixous's Creaturely Poethics

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### Abstract

Drawing on Jacques Derrida's and Sarah Kofman's conception of writing, Anat Pick's notion of the 'creaturely' and Kári Driscoll's 'zoopoethics', this article discusses the relationship between textuality and animality in Hélène Cixous's work. Cixous's writing has been described as inscribing the body in the text, which may be considered an ethical engagement; her embodied poethics can thus be called a *creaturely poethics*. The analysis focuses mostly on Cixous's latest texts: *Les Sans Arche d'Adel Abdessemed* (2018), *Animal amour* (2021) – which deal openly with animals – and her recent fictions on the Shoah, *1938, nuits* (2019) and *Ruines bien rangées* (2020). In them, animality not only traverses human and non-human animals, but also beings considered inanimate, such as Osnabrück's synagogue. Particularly, *Ruines bien rangées* gives a voice – and, above all, a 'cry' – to all beings reduced to silence, and therefore to death, by the Nazis.

**Keywords:** *Hélène Cixous, animality, writing, poethics, animals' love, cry*

Animals and animality have always been present in Hélène Cixous's oeuvre, since her first published book, *Le Prénom de Dieu* (1967), which featured Jonas's whale – Jonas being one of her mother's family names. The main character – if one may say that of Cixous's *fictions*, which are far from being classical novels – of *Messie* (1996) is inspired by Tessie, the nickname of Thessalonica, a female cat the author had adopted and with whom she invented 'Frenchcat' (*franchat*), a special language in which the human and the non-human animal could communicate. This paper will focus, however, on some of Cixous's latest works, where the theme of animality permeates writing itself: *Animal amour* (2021), a lecture addressed to young adults on the theme of animals' love, and *Les Sans Arche d'Adel Abdessemed* (2018), which also deals openly with animals, along with her recent fictions on the Shoah, such as *1938, nuits* (2019) and *Ruines bien rangées* (2020), where animals appear in a more subdued way. First, I will sketch how Cixous's conception of writing interweaves with animals, also drawing on Jacques Derrida's and Sarah Kofman's developments concerning the relationship between animality and writing.

### Writing and Animals

In a recent interview, answering the question of how animals and writing were related for her, Hélène Cixous stated:

To write like an animal is to return to inhabiting one's body most spontaneously. It is a matter of *faire corps*,<sup>1</sup> which we do not always know how to do anymore, so much we are forced to discipline ourselves, [...] [To write] You need a body that uses all its senses, that feels its heart beat, that follows the path of the blood under the skin, that follows the rhythm of the breath. [...] A bit like a dog in nature: they do not trample it, they scratch it, smell it, listen to it.<sup>2</sup>

This description perfectly fits one of the main designations applied to Cixous's writing, often called 'body writing' or 'writing with the body'. This critical approach is especially frequent among feminist critics who have pondered on *écriture féminine*, a concept that Cixous launched in 1975 in her poetic manifesto 'Le rire de la Méduse' ('The Laugh of the Medusa'). Leaving aside the hotly debated question whether this notion refers only to women's writing – which the text's English translation implies,<sup>3</sup> but which Cixous never claimed, quite the contrary –, *écriture féminine* is characterized in this text by the image of the *vol*, in its double meaning in French of seizing the property of others (theft) and flying. The flight brings us to the animal kingdom, and in fact, the writers whom Cixous mentions as examples of *écriture féminine*<sup>4</sup> – such as Jean Genet or Heinrich von Kleist, both men – are notable for questioning all kinds of boundaries, between genders and between species, among others. *Écriture féminine* – or, simply, writing, since Cixous later dropped the adjective, maybe because of all the misunderstandings it had provoked<sup>5</sup> – is, thus, one that inscribes the body in the text, more than thematizing it, even in new ways with regard to the literary tradition.

'To risk' the writer's own 'active body in the text' (as Cixous says speaking of Derrida's 'Circumfession')<sup>6</sup> may also be understood as an ethical engagement. Cixous herself, among other French women writers related to the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* (MLF), engaged in this sort of writing in the 1970's. That is why one can say that this poetics is also an embodied 'poethics',<sup>7</sup> which could also be called (in Anat Pick's sense) a 'creaturely' poethics, as shown, for instance, by the famous sentence, 'Let the priests tremble: we're going to show them our sexts!'<sup>8</sup> The portmanteau word 'sext', which has been much used subsequently and on whose linguistic principle the term 'poethics' has been coined and applied to Cixous's work, epitomizes the imbrication between the body and the text that Cixous is postulating in a performative

<sup>1</sup> The French idiomatic expression *faire corps*, literally 'making body', may be translated here as 'becoming one with one's own body'.

<sup>2</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Que de chiens à demi étranglés, traînés, interdits... c'est terrible cette répression: entre humains et humains, c'est pareil', interview with Thibaut Sardier, *Libération*, 3 April 2021; available at <http://www.liberation.fr> [accessed 03.05.21].

<sup>3</sup> 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875-93, opens with this sentence: 'I shall speak about women's writing [*écriture féminine* in the French original]: about *what it will do*' (875).

<sup>4</sup> Many commentators, like myself, choose not to translate the French phrase, in order not to feed the misunderstanding that consists in conflating *écriture féminine* and women's writing.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the published version of Cixous's Seminar *Lettres de fuite. Séminaire 2001-2004*, ed. Marta Segarra (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Tales of Sexual Difference' (fragment), trans. Eric Prenowitz, in *The Portable Cixous*, ed. Marta Segarra (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>7</sup> See Mireille Calle-Gruber and Hélène Cixous, *Hélène Cixous, Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 79. The term 'poethics' had already been used before in relation to deconstruction; i.e. Richard Weisberg, *Poethics: And Other Strategies of Law and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 885.

way. Its derivative, 'sexuality', also renders this intertwining, which belies the opposition between a textual, or formal, and a *material*, embodied or affective approach to texts, both as a reader and as a writer. Cixous also deconstructs this dichotomy between an *active* and a *passive* approach to writing and literature, coining the word 'readwriting'.<sup>9</sup>

This embodied *sexuality* that undoubtedly distinguishes Cixous's texts, among (not so many) others, undermines the supremacy of phallogocentrism that characterizes most literary works of all times, according to 'The Laugh of the Medusa', those that come from a hegemonic 'masculine' 'libidinal economy' instead of stemming from a 'feminine' one. Again, this is not about *real* men and women authors, but about libidinal positions – which are also 'political' – that may be taken by any body.<sup>10</sup> The (feminine) writing that results from this embodied poethics displaces or destabilizes the subject – the author as well as the reader, but especially the writer, who is dispossessed or *disappropriated* from the mastery of their own text. For Cixous, the author has no authority on their text, but is a midwife who has to make writing 'come', as she describes in one of her early essays, 'Coming to Writing'.<sup>11</sup> In Jacques Derrida's similar words, the writer 'must give up on performative authority' so that linguistic 'events' can appear.<sup>12</sup>

Writing is, therefore, not defined by its 'properties', nor is it 'proper' to its author, contrary to 'style', which Derrida considers a 'phallogocentric' category, being an incision in the text that marks the author's mastery.<sup>13</sup> Writing amounts to 'what cannot be reappropriated',<sup>14</sup> instead of being one of man's 'properties', that is to say, one of the most distinctive traits that distinguish 'man' from 'the animal', as is usually thought. That is why writing contributes to 're-thinking the concept of man, the figure of humanity in general',<sup>15</sup> thus deconstructing the divide between man and animal. Moreover, for Derrida, writing is closer to non-human animals than speech, since writing has to do with the 'trace', with 'iterability', and with '*différance*', all these 'possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language', but which are 'themselves not only human'.<sup>16</sup>

After Derrida, Sarah Kofman characterizes writing inversely to the traditional opposition between writing as a privilege of the civilized human, and the 'guttural

<sup>9</sup> Cixous uses this term in different texts, such as *Philippines*, trans. Laurent Milesi (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 879.

<sup>11</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Coming to Writing (1976)', in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle and Susan Sellers, ed. Deborah Jenson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986): 1-58.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, in Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, *Lengua por venir/Langue à venir. Seminario de Barcelona*, ed. Marta Segarra (Barcelona: Icaria, 2004), 79.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979). See also Laurent Milesi, 'St!le-in-deconstruction', in *Style in Theory: Between Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Ivan Callus, James Corby and Gloria Lauri-Lucente (London: Continuum, 2013), 217-48.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, in Cixous and Derrida, 78.

<sup>15</sup> 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: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 29.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Eating Well or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell, in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York, London: Routledge, 1991), 116.

language' of 'savages' and animals.<sup>17</sup> Kofman acknowledges that animals' language is conveyed through their voice and their body; however, what would seem again an opposition between animal language, oral and corporeal, and human language, written and intellectual, is deconstructed, first of all by relating writing to the body, similarly to Cixous's proposal. Hence, in a passage from *Lectures de Derrida*, Kofman interestingly compares writing to women's sex:

Writing, a form of disruption of presence, is, like woman, always lowered, reduced to the last rank. Like female genitalia, it disturbs, dumbfounds, petrifies. *Die Heimliche* is one of the German words equivalent to *Geheimnis* to express the secret parts of the body, the *pudenda*. However, many men experience an uncanny feeling, an effect of *Unheimlichkeit*, in front of the female organs.<sup>18</sup>

This uncanny writing<sup>19</sup> is, on the one hand, sexualized and, on the other hand, feminized through the evocation of the Medusa, in an (implicit) allusion to *écriture féminine* as conceptualized by Cixous in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', and especially to the sentence previously quoted, 'Let the priests tremble, we will show them our sexts!', of which this passage could be an echo. In a later fiction, *Messie*, Cixous also describes what she terms *franchat*, or the cat's French language, in relation to sexuality, thanks to the double meaning of the word *chatte* ('pussy').<sup>20</sup>

Kofman's other argument to deconstruct the hierarchical dichotomy between animal and human language consists in claiming that writing is *greffé* (grafted) as well as *griffé* (clawed or scratched). Writing is grafted because it is 'citational', which reveals its 'absence of paternity' or its 'bastardy'.<sup>21</sup> This statement echoes Derrida's and Cixous's elaborations on the writer's lack of authority over their own texts. As for the *écriture griffée*, the image of the claw refers to 'an instrument of writing but also of self-defense, a means of seizing the property of others', according to Kofman.<sup>22</sup> Again, this can be related to Hélène Cixous and her image of the *vol*, meaning both theft and flight, in relation to writing. Grafted and clawed writing, therefore, 'comes to erase the "autos" and to lacerate the bios under the whip of Thanatos', thus effacing 'the signature of the proper name and the unique author', states Kofman.<sup>23</sup> Writing, in other words, undermines the foundations of the classical subject: the coincidence with itself, its stability, the fixation of life in a narrative, or what has been termed, drawing from Paul Ricœur, its 'narrative identity'.<sup>24</sup> That is why writing, or 'bastard' writing as conceived by Kofman, 'introduces the other in the same' and 'blurs the borders of humanity and animality'.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Kofman, *Autobiogriffures. Du chat Murr d'Hoffmann*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. corrected ed. (Paris: Galilée, 1984), 74-5. I have developed this comment on Kofman's notion of writing in 'Contre une lecture antinomique de *Rue Ordener, rue Labat*', in *Sarah Kofman: philosophe autrement*, ed. Ginette Michaud and Isabelle Ullern (Paris: Hermann, 2021), 415-26.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Kofman, *Lectures de Derrida* (Paris: Galilée, 1984), 26; translation mine.

<sup>19</sup> I have elaborated on this notion in 'Uncanny Animal Writing', *Oxford Literary Review* 42.2 (2020): 279-82.

<sup>20</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Messie* (Paris: des femmes-Antoinette Fouque, 1996), 101-16.

<sup>21</sup> Kofman, *Autobiogriffures*, 74-75.

<sup>22</sup> Kofman, *Autobiogriffures*, 63.

<sup>23</sup> Kofman, *Autobiogriffures*, 74-75.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> Kofman, *Autobiogriffures*, 74-75.

One could add that this writing is also *féminine* – even though Kofman does not use the term – because it is contrary to the ‘carno-phallogocentric’ structure or the ‘carnivorous virility’ that defines the human subject according to Derrida.<sup>26</sup> This sexualization or *genderization* is also noted by Cixous, who relates the ‘courage’ that one must have to ‘cross the frontier of species’ to ‘maternal tenderness’ – only to specify that men can also be tenderly maternal.<sup>27</sup>

Hence, writing would perhaps allow the appearance of a subject ‘that would no longer include the figure of mastery of self, of adequation to self, center and origin of the world, etc... but [...] the subject rather as the finite experience of nonidentity to self, as the underivable interpellation inasmuch as it comes from the other, from the trace of the other’.<sup>28</sup> This *postdeconstructive* subject would not be limited to humans or founded in the opposition between humanity and animality.

## Writing in the Place of the Animal

In the episode ‘Animal’ of his *Abécédaire*, Gilles Deleuze says that ‘the writer is responsible for the animals that die’ and therefore that they must write ‘in the place’ of these animals – in the double sense of putting themselves in the animals’ place and speaking in their name.<sup>29</sup> In Hélène Cixous’s literary world, the animal who is in this place is, primarily, the dog Fips (also called ‘Job the dog’ in the first explicit account of his story).<sup>30</sup> Fips is a ‘real’ dog, according to the author,<sup>31</sup> but also a ‘figure’ (in Kári Driscoll’s sense)<sup>32</sup> of all the animals who shout or ‘cry’ in Cixous’s oeuvre. When he is brought as a pup to the Cixous family home in Algeria by Hélène’s father, Fips ‘throws crying glances of desire’ (*‘il nous lançait des regards criants de désir’*) that the children do not understand and, therefore, that go unanswered.<sup>33</sup> This scene is reminiscent of the powerful passage ‘My Three-Legged Dog’ in Cixous’s *The Day I Wasn’t There* when the narrator comes across an abandoned dog who is ‘crying’ that, although he has only three legs, he is a ‘nice’, sweet dog, and fervently prays to be adopted; however, the humans cannot take him and therefore leave him to his fate.<sup>34</sup>

This unnamed three-legged dog also gives the impression of being a *real* dog, and at the same time a figure of the disabled child left in Algeria (who died the day his mother ‘wasn’t there’) to whom this fiction pays homage. The animals who appear most often in Cixous’s world (Fips, Tessie, Philia and Alêtheia, also known as Theia) are individualized with their real names since they correspond to animals who have shared the author’s life, but at the same time seem to be one and the same animal, not only

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, ‘Eating Well’, 113.

<sup>27</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Animal amour* (Paris: Bayard, 2021), 48.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, ‘Eating Well’, 103.

<sup>29</sup> *L’Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, dir. Pierre-André Boutang and Michel Pamart, 1988-1989 (France: La Femis-Sodaperaga Productions, 1996); available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SINYVnCUvVg&list=PLiR8NqajHNPbaX2rBoA2z6IPGpU0IPI2> [accessed 12 April 2021].

<sup>30</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘Stigmata, or Job the Dog’, trans. Eric Prenowitz, in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 149-58.

<sup>31</sup> Cixous, *Animal amour*, 68.

<sup>32</sup> Kári Driscoll, ‘Second Glance at the Panther, or: What Does it Mean to Read Zoopoetically?’, *Frame* 31.1 (2018): 43.

<sup>33</sup> Cixous, *Animal amour*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Hélène Cixous, *The Day I Wasn’t There*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 10-11.

because their lives succeed one another (Tessie revived the long-dead but never forgotten Fips, and Philia and Alètheia were mysteriously born the same day when Tessie died)<sup>35</sup> but also because they incarnate the figure of the tortured and excluded ‘innocent’. In this sense, Cixous’s animals are truly ‘zoopoetical’, according to Kári Driscoll’s notion, since the reader cannot oppose the ‘real’ and the ‘metaphorical textual animal’.<sup>36</sup>

The highly emotional scene featuring the ‘three-legged dog’ contains a short paragraph whose lines of uneven length form a kind of poem – which is rare in Cixous – that includes an allusion to Christ’s cry on the cross: ‘Why have you forsaken me?’<sup>37</sup> This leap into a spiritual dimension (though not specifically religious, since Cixous is not a Christian), departing from a story of an abandoned dog, might also be linked to Anat Pick’s characterization of the ‘creaturely’ as a ‘rapprochement between the material and the sacred’, differing in this regard from the simply ‘material’ or ‘corporeal’.<sup>38</sup> Thus, although they are *real*, specific individuals whom the author has encountered, animals play a creaturely zoopoetical role in Cixous, transporting readers to a spiritual or mythical dimension.

The double abandonment of which the narrator of *The Day I Wasn’t There* feels guilty is immediately followed by another passage in which she speaks about the documentary, *The Specialist, Portrait of a Modern Criminal*, based on Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which includes footage of Eichmann’s trial. This relationship between forsaken animals left to their suffering inflicted by humans and Nazi treatment of the Jews can be found in other Cixous texts, especially in her recent series of fictions devoted to her German mother’s family,<sup>39</sup> whose members were forced into exile or assassinated in extermination camps.

The latest of these fictions (until the moment when this paper was written), *Ruines bien rangées* (2020), gives a voice – or, better, a ‘cry’ – to all those *humanimals* reduced to silence, and therefore to death, like the anti-Nazi journalist from Osnabrück – the hometown of Cixous’s mother –, who goes from calling himself *Ilex* to being silenced and named *Sillex*, before being killed by drowning in the river Hase.<sup>40</sup> In a book full of metamorphoses, often implying changing of species, *Ilex*’s goes from the vegetable to the mineral, that is, in principle, from the living and animate to the inanimate. However, Cixous’s phyto-zoopoetics includes also what is usually considered nonliving matter, such as stones. Stones have a powerful presence in *Ruines*, including a picture of two *Stolpersteine*, or ‘stumbling blocks’, that the city of Osnabrück installed in its streets to commemorate their deported and exiled Jewish citizens. It could therefore be said that in Cixous’s texts, animality not only traverses human and non-human animals but also objects or entities considered inanimate, such as Osnabrück’s synagogue, which was ‘killed’, according to the author, by being burned down during *Kristallnacht*. The book’s title, *Ruines bien rangées* (literally: tidy, well-

<sup>35</sup> According to Cixous (*Animal amour*, 67).

<sup>36</sup> Driscoll, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Cixous, *The Day I Wasn’t There*, 11-12.

<sup>38</sup> Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics. Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 17.

<sup>39</sup> By ‘series’ I mean most of the books published by Cixous from *Gare d’Osnabrück à Jérusalem* (Paris: Galilée, 2016) until *Ruines bien rangées* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020), with the possible exception of *Nacres* (Paris: Galilée, 2019), which reproduces passages from Cixous’s *cahiers*.

<sup>40</sup> Cixous, *Ruines bien rangées*, 21-22.

ordered ruins), alludes to a memorial, made of stones, for this synagogue, to which I will return.

This fiction also features a 'Museum of Cries', those of the women accused of witchcraft, who were kept in a prison tower, used two centuries later for detained Jewish persons, before being respectively thrown into the river Hase or deported to the camps. *Ruines bien rangées* itself could also be considered a 'museum of cries', but only if we think of museums as containing not just objects but what could be called 'animated things'. These 'things' may be related to the 'written things' that Rilke – one of Cixous's cherished authors – wished to inhabit his poems,<sup>41</sup> which could also be linked to 'animots', a term coined by Cixous and theorized by Derrida.<sup>42</sup> Cixous seems to think that a book is also an *animot*, a living creature of animal species made by *mots* (words). In *We Defy Augury*, for instance, she describes Erich Maria Remarque's novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, as a 'magnificent animal full of life and terror, a deer maybe, or a species of angel, wild and refined, it is more than a friend, a lover, the sort that is proud and poignant like a quadruped angel, to whom I am indissolubly tied as my heart is joint to the heart of my cat'.<sup>43</sup> We can perhaps also read here an allusion to Rilke's 'heart-work', which Driscoll associates with the above-mentioned 'written-things'. In any case, the characterization of this text by Remarque – who was born in Osnabrück – would perfectly fit Cixous's. As she says, again about another author, in this case, the Algerian-born artist Adel Abdessemed, these works do not 'make discourses, an image takes flight [...] Before theory. Before the thing is fixed in theorem. / The body is still warm'.<sup>44</sup> As I have remarked elsewhere,<sup>45</sup> this last sentence makes a strong impression on the reader since it can be easily associated with animals who have just been killed or are about to be killed, featured in many of Abdessemed's works.

Cixous's writing, therefore, animates with a vital breath apparently inanimate 'things', transforming them into animals, or *animots*. In *Ruines bien rangées*, *animots* seem to be more numerous and powerful than ever before. Already in its first pages, we see 'cars that remember having been horses' and 'words [that] howl at death'.<sup>46</sup> Another evocative *animot* is that of the 'esplanade as vast as a white paper ream that paws the ground waiting for the lines and signs to land'.<sup>47</sup> Here, the *animot*-horse that stands for the blank sheet of paper is the (future) repository of the *animot*-birds who will land on it and on the pages that follow. *Animots* therefore stand for words, for characters, and for the book itself.

## Hungry Love and Death

Animals also embody 'pure love' in Cixous's textual world, as she suggests in *Animal amour*, stating that 'there is a language in which we can translate ourselves and

<sup>41</sup> See Driscoll, 37.

<sup>42</sup> The coining of this term is generally attributed to Derrida – see *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 37 –, but Cixous had already used it in *La* (Paris: Des femmes, 1979, re-ed.), 94.

<sup>43</sup> Hélène Cixous, *We Defy Augury*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2020), 96.

<sup>44</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Les Sans Arche d'Adel Abdessemed* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), 11-12.

<sup>45</sup> Marta Segarra, 'Derrida, Cixous, and Feminine Writing', in *Understanding Derrida, Understanding Modernism*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 226-39.

<sup>46</sup> Cixous, *Ruines bien rangées*, 11-12.

<sup>47</sup> Cixous, *Ruines bien rangées*, 16.



understand each other between living beings'.<sup>48</sup> This universal language is also that of literature, as it can be perceived in the following passage referring to a cat: 'she also knew how to put herself within my reach, to my size, to my shape, to my measure, she could be the child, the fiancée, the fiancé, the lover, the human, she whose being had the lightness of a feather/pen (*plume*). She moulded this being on mine without weighing, without crushing'.<sup>49</sup> As in Henri Michaux's poetry,<sup>50</sup> love is measured by its absence of weight, symbolized by a feather, which evokes birds – a familiar species in Cixous – although the quotation refers to a particular cat, but also writing since the French word *plume* means both feather and pen.

The lightness of *animal amour* also marks its fragility, which is part of 'creaturely poetics', according to Pick:<sup>51</sup> 'Of animal love, death is certain', says Cixous.<sup>52</sup> Death can occur by accident, illness or aging, but in this case, love remains: 'love does not stop, fortunately. That's why beings who have died still live, because we don't stop loving them'.<sup>53</sup> However, love's death also happens, not only because of misunderstandings and ill-placed pride but also because love tends to devour the other, as is poetically described in 'Love of the Wolf', in which the wolf and the lamb embody love: 'Love is when you suddenly wake up as a cannibal [...] or else wake up destined for devourment'.<sup>54</sup> This 'devourment' refers to the fusional temptation that comes with passion, but this temptation is felt by the wolf as well as by the lamb since the predator and the prey are both embodied in each. Moreover, this sentence is to be understood not only in a figurative sense but also literally, as the insistence of Cixous's text on the physical act of eating suggests; for instance, in 'As soon as we embrace, we salivate'.<sup>55</sup>

Devouring and cannibalism are prominent themes in *Ruines bien rangées*. If 'loving is wanting and being able to eat up and yet to stop at the boundary',<sup>56</sup> actually eating the other stems from hatred and cruelty – and Derrida reminds us that *cruel* comes from the Latin *crucior*, meaning spilled blood, and related to sacrifice.<sup>57</sup> The women of Osnabrück convicted of witchcraft are thrown into the river Hase, which comes to life becoming a devouring *animot*, in the same way that the prison into which the Jews are tossed after *Kristallnacht* is a 'belly'.<sup>58</sup> These women, as well as Osnabrück Jews two centuries later, are deprived of humanity by their accusers and torturers. If Hélène Cixous's work is mostly known for deconstructing genre and gender boundaries, it also problematizes, as we have seen, the strict limit between the human and the non-human, that is, between species. However, the change of species, when

<sup>48</sup> Cixous, *Animal amour*, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Cixous, *Animal amour*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, in 'Chaînes enchaînées', which begins with this line: 'Don't weigh more than a flame and all will be well', in Henri Michaux, *La Nuit remue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 167. Michaux also plays with the double sense of *plume* in French, meaning feather and pen.

<sup>51</sup> Pick, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Cixous, *Animal amour*, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Cixous, *Animal amour*, 73.

<sup>54</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Love of the Wolf', trans. Keith Cohen, in *Stigmata. Escaping Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 78.

<sup>55</sup> Cixous, 'Love of the Wolf', 74.

<sup>56</sup> Cixous, 'Love of the Wolf', 78.

<sup>57</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Psychoanalysis Searches the States of Its Soul: The Impossible Beyond of a Sovereign Cruelty', in *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002): 238-80. Derrida also addresses this topic in *The Death Penalty. Volume I*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> Cixous, *Ruines bien rangées*, 25.

imposed, conveys a debasement from humanity, reducing the other to an animal who can be killed through a 'non-criminal putting to death', according to Derrida's expression.<sup>59</sup> This is the case of the witches and the Jews, devoured by the river and by the prison tower in what is described as a 'cannibalistic' act. The use of the term 'cannibal' manifests once more the crossing of species boundaries that Cixous's writing carries out.

There is a constant 'virtuality of cannibalism'<sup>60</sup> in *Ruines bien rangées* and also in Cixous's previous fiction, *1938, nuits*: not only 'does one time eat the other'<sup>61</sup> – the time when women were accused of sorcery and executed, the time when Jews were deported and assassinated, and also present time – but both victims and executioners are transformed into devoured/devouring animals. *1938, nuits* describes *Kristallnacht* as an apocalyptic *Dies Irae*, in which many honorable citizens of Osnabrück turn into 'devilish executioners'<sup>62</sup> who come to see and applaud the arrest and deportation of their Jewish fellow citizens, constituting 'the cruel human-inhuman public eager for the show of capital executions, which does not miss an opportunity to graze'.<sup>63</sup> The verb *paître* used in the French original means 'to graze', but also, in an older use, 'to revel', which emphasizes the eating connotation. Moreover, the disease called cruelty – since wickedness 'spread in Europe with rapidity and virulence like a Spanish flu' –<sup>64</sup> causes immediate metamorphoses in those affected: 'we switched brains and species';<sup>65</sup> the victims are immediately changed, as if by witchcraft, into cattle, calves, oxen and pigs, while the 'canine' SS officers 'bark naturally'.<sup>66</sup> Nazis' victims become cattle doomed to be eaten whereas their murderers are transformed into carnivorous beasts. The eaten are thus demoted from their humanity: 'prisoners, for the most part, have lost their sublime and mysterious native treasure: humanity'.<sup>67</sup>

The use of the term 'humanity' seems to contradict Cixous's blurring of the frontiers between species, but it is also applied to non-human animals, and even to apparently inanimated beings. The most striking example of the usage of this extended category of 'humanity' is Osnabrück's synagogue, which, or better, *who* was burnt alive, like a convicted witch, during *Kristallnacht*. This criminal fire is described as a historical event and at the same time as 'a metaphor',<sup>68</sup> the beginning of a descent into hell by one of the main characters of *1938, nuits*, Siegfried – and one cannot but notice the mythical connotations of this name, alluding to a creature of the woods, a former wild child, who unites the human, the animal and the vegetable sides. Siegfried from Osnabrück leaves his house in the middle of the night, like many other inhabitants of the city, to witness the fire that triggers the Nazi persecution; thousands of Jews will be arrested that same night and deported to 'the Camp before the Camp', where 'hell tries its hand'<sup>69</sup> and where they will die by the hundreds. The scene of the fire is extraordinary: the consuming synagogue is characterized as a moaning skeleton, which

<sup>59</sup> Derrida, 'Eating Well', 112.

<sup>60</sup> Cixous, *Ruines bien rangées*, 24.

<sup>61</sup> Cixous, *Ruines bien rangées*, 24.

<sup>62</sup> Hélène Cixous, *1938, nuits* (Paris: Galilée, 2019), 70.

<sup>63</sup> Cixous, *1938, nuits*, 140.

<sup>64</sup> Cixous, *1938, nuits*, 46.

<sup>65</sup> Cixous, *1938, nuits*, 41.

<sup>66</sup> Cixous, *1938, nuits*, 37-39.

<sup>67</sup> Cixous, *1938, nuits*, 79.

<sup>68</sup> Cixous, *1938, nuits*, 22.

<sup>69</sup> Cixous, *1938, nuits*, 73.

resembles the whale skeleton hanging in the New Bedford Whaling Museum, still weeping tears: 'It's like watching an elephant burn alive worse a whale with no sea, no water, standing up, gigantic'.<sup>70</sup> The biggest animal in nature, whale or elephant, is reduced to ashes in a 'world pyre' since '[it] is us who are burning, there', in 'this grilling of hundreds of naked hopes like children put to the pyre'.<sup>71</sup> The book includes a photograph of the burned synagogue, which is also one of the most remarkable animal characters in Cixous's following fiction, *Ruines bien rangées*. Here, the 'poor little synagogue [...] burnt alive'<sup>72</sup> is related to two paintings, Felix Nussbaum's (also born in Osnabrück) *Interior of Osnabrück's Synagogue* and Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox*, an iconic image in Cixous's textual world. The animate sacred being, the synagogue, is therefore killed by the fire, and this murder provokes the 'mourning of the soul, surprised to the heart by the unimaginable violence of inhumanity'.<sup>73</sup> As one can also understand from reading Cixous's essay 'Volleys of humanity',<sup>74</sup> this term does not qualify humans alone but refers to an 'embodied conviviality'<sup>75</sup> of beings, animate as well as inanimate, which humans frequently break.

A memorial of the disappeared synagogue of Osnabrück was erected in 2004, near the place where it used to be. The title *Ruines bien rangées* refers to this monument, described as a 'calcified henhouse': for the narrator, the caged rubble that pays homage to the murdered synagogue is tantamount to tidy, well-stored ruins, since the remnants of the synagogue have been 'embalmed' and 'sterilized', to the point that they are no longer ruins.<sup>76</sup> Monumentalizing, although intending to make the synagogue immortal, prevents transformation and the passage of time that the true ruin witnesses, and consequently kills again instead of reviving.

## Animal Writing

Erecting a monument may therefore amount to devouring or cannibalizing the dead one to whom the monument wants to pay homage, in the same way that 'archive fever', as defined by Derrida, comes from a wish for conservation as much as from a 'destruction drive'.<sup>77</sup> *Ruines bien rangées* also features its narrator emptying the apartment of her deceased mother: 'I undid it. Emptied. Eviscerated. [...] I tidied up. I cleaned up. I butchered and adored'. She adds: 'Every time I go there, I sit at the cannibal table. I eat a piece-of-mom.'<sup>78</sup> Tidying the remnants of her mother's life conveys the same ambivalence of the devouring or cannibal impulse, which is at the same time vivifying and immortalizing. The best way to preserve, or even to revive long-dead beings, is, thus, by transforming them into *animots*, through *living* writing or *animal* writing.

<sup>70</sup> Cixous, *1938, nuits*, 30 and 32. The reference to this particular whale, which still exudes liquid drops, is implicit in the text.

<sup>71</sup> Cixous, *1938, nuits*, 32 and 34-35.

<sup>72</sup> Cixous, *Ruines bien rangées*, 75.

<sup>73</sup> Cixous, *1938, nuits*, 79.

<sup>74</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Volleys of Humanity', trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Volleys of Humanity: Essays 1972-2009*, ed. Eric Prenowitz (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 264-85.

<sup>75</sup> The expression is from Ralph Acampora, quoted in Pick, 14.

<sup>76</sup> Cixous, *Ruines bien rangées*, 74 and 76-77.

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7 and 10.

<sup>78</sup> Cixous, *Ruines bien rangées*, 148-49.

Putting it in a slightly different way, Cixous says that she writes 'like an animal'.<sup>79</sup> Writing like an animal or in the place of dead animals, as Deleuze phrases it, would therefore amount to making their 'cries' heard, even the mute cry of the carp who is killed on a kitchen table in one of Adel Abdessemed's videos.<sup>80</sup> However, Cixous acknowledges the limited effect of the 'cry of literature',<sup>81</sup> applied to resuscitate the dead loved ones:

When I write, I write for him, Fips, a Jewish dog without knowing it, without being one, I push the writing to the point of crying, to the rattle of barking, but what flows under my pen is a specter of barking, ashes of crying. It is not given to me to bring Fips back from the dead, nor to console him. Not to deny is our only freedom.<sup>82</sup>

This *caveat* might be applied to *animal writing* as well as to *creaturely poethics*; as Cixous also concludes in her 'poem' of *The Day I Wasn't There*, we have all abandoned and been abandoned,<sup>83</sup> and readwriting will never redeem the suffering and death of animals, including human animals.

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<sup>79</sup> Cixous, *Animal amour*, 68.

<sup>80</sup> Commented on by Cixous in the chapter 'Le cri de la carpe', in *Les Sans Arche*, 53-68.

<sup>81</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Ay Yay! The Cry of Literature', trans. Eric Prenowitz, in *Ways of Re-Thinking Literature*, ed. Tom Bishop and Donatien Grau (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 199-217.

<sup>82</sup> Cixous, *Les Sans Arche*, 75.

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## **Po-etica creaturală [Creaturely Poethics] a lui Hélène Cixous**

### **Rezumat**

Pornind de la concepția despre scriitură a filosofilor Jacques Derrida și Sarah Kofman, noțiunea de 'creaturely' [creatural] a lui Anat Pick și noțiunea de zoopoetică a lui Kári Driscoll, acest articol discută relația dintre textualitate și animalitate în opera lui Hélène Cixous. Scrierea lui Cixous a fost descrisă ca înscriind coporalitatea în text, ceea ce poate fi considerat un angajament etic; poetica corporalității ei poate fi așadar numită o *po-etică creaturală*. Analiza se concentrează mai ales pe textele recente ale lui Cixous: *Les Sans Arche d'Adel Abdessemed* (2018), *Animal amour* (2021) – care tratează în prim plan animalul – și cele mai recente narațiuni ale ei despre Shoah, *1938, nuits* (2019) și *Ruines bien rangées* (2020). În acestea, animalitatea nu doar că traversează umanul și animalul non-uman, dar și fapte considerate a fi neînsuflite, ca de exemplu sinagoga Osnabrück. În mod particular, *Ruines bien rangées* devine vocea – și, mai presus de toate, un „plânset” – al tuturor ființelor reduse la tăcere, și, prin urmare, condamnate la moarte de naziști.