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**“THE RIGHT TO WRITE
– OR IMAGINING HUMAN DIFFERENCE
ANEW WITH HÉLÈNE CIXOUS”**

I call poet any writing being who sets out on this path, in quest of what I call the second innocence, the one that comes after knowing, the one that no longer knows, the one that knows how not to know¹.

In the wake of the Holocaust, and in a transnational context, the French-Algerian philosopher Hélène Cixous (1937–) makes her Jewish voice heard by crossing borders and asking questions. Like an existential rumination she writes back and forth on what it means to be alive, to be different, amongst other (different) creatures. She acts through novels, theoretical essays, dramas and critical poetry when she, as I would like to put it, continuously imagines what it means to be human. *Imagine* is a proper word for describing her political and poetical philosophy as it is permeated with tentative thinking, acknowledged dreams and critical belief. To Cixous, writing is a way of existing, a way of repelling death – even if death is what makes us remember the richness and complexity of life – writing is good, it’s “what never ends”². However, writing is not painless, not self-evident. There are constraints that may forbid you to write and for Cixous herself there were many: her sex, her origin, history (being a Jewish female foreigner in Algeria as well as in France). Nevertheless, the desire to write is dreadful, or as the literary critic Susan Rubin Suleiman puts it, with reference to Cixous’ way of writing, “desire is precisely what does not ask whether it has

¹ Hélène Cixous, “The Last Painting or the Portrait of God” in *“Coming to writing” and other essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 114.

² Hélène Cixous, “Coming to writing” in *“Coming to writing” and other essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 4.

a ‘right’ to exist”³. In this article, I would like to introduce Cixous’ way of writing as a way of imagining human difference anew. A way of making people think on their own, a way of being part of a continuous creation where dominant borders are crossed, hierarchical patterns are questioned and new forms of communication beyond words are envisioned. I do it through samples from the text universe of Cixous and in conversation with Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin.

Writing and imagining

In one of her most important auto-biographical texts, with the significant title “*Coming to writing*” and *Other Essays*, Cixous reflects on the fundamental question of the right to write, taking herself, as mind *and* body, as a starting point.

Wouldn’t you first have needed the “right reasons” to write? The reasons, mysterious to me, that give you the “right” to write? But I didn’t know them. I had only the “wrong” reason; it wasn’t a reason, it was a passion, something shameful – and disturbing; one of those violent characteristics with which I was afflicted. I didn’t “want” to write. How could I have “wanted” to? I hadn’t strayed to the point of losing all measures of things. A mouse is not a prophet. I wouldn’t have had the cheek to go claim my book from God on Mount Sinai, even if, as a mouse, I had found the energy to scamper up the mountain. No reasons at all. But there was madness. Writing was in the air around me. Always close, intoxicating, invisible, inaccessible. I undergo writing! It came to me abruptly. One day I was tracked down, besieged, taken. It captured me. I was seized. From where? I knew nothing about it. I’ve never known anything about it. From some bodily region. I don’t know where. “Writing” seized me, gripped me, around the diaphragm, between the stomach and the chest, a blast dilated my lungs and I stopped breathing. Suddenly I was filled with a turbulence that knocked the wind out of me and inspired me to wild acts. “Write”. When I say “writing” seized me, it wasn’t a sentence that had managed to seduce me, there was absolutely nothing written, not a letter, not a line. But in the depths of the flesh, the attack. Pushed. Not penetrated. Invested. Set in motion. The attack was imperious: “Write”! Even though I was only a meager anonymous mouse, I knew vividly the awful jolt that galvanizes the prophet, wakened in the mid-life by an order from

³ Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Writing Past the Wall” in “*Coming to writing*” and *other essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. ix.

above. It's a force to make you cross oceans. Me, write? But I wasn't a prophet⁴.

Cixous' writing is not a choice, she is "seized" by it, "tracked down, besieged, taken", and it inspires her to "wild acts". Literally, she denies being a writer, being a prophet, yet she writes. She is the recalcitrant prophet. She is a symbolic relative of other recalcitrant prophets, as Jona and Jeremia known from the Hebrew Bible. Even if there is no visible God in Cixous' text quoted above, she compares writing with God elsewhere in the same book ("Writing is God", 1991, p 11) and, as we shall see, prominent themes from both Jona and Jeremia are explicitly present in her writing. I am thinking of her compassion for animals (cf. Jona 4:10 where God saves Nineve in spite of its sinful inhabitants, human beings as well as animals) and her non-conceptualized way of making philosophy. She puts theories, laws and structures in the background and uplifts practical action, feelings and deconstruction (cf. Jeremia 31:31–33; where a new covenant of God is actualized, a covenant that will not be delivered on stones, but in the hearts of the human beings).

The writing of Cixous burst from the lived experience of being other, becoming different and belonging to the margins, always exposed to a double alienation: from Algerians because she is French and from French because she is Algerian. The loss of her father in early childhood marks her authorship, as well as her rootlessness and the absence of a distinct nationality, but *not* exclusively in a destructive way. In her own words, this is also to be seen as chances and conditions for her writings: "My way of writing was born in Algeria by a lost country, a dead father and a foreign mother"⁵.

In her early text *The Laugh of the Medusa* (*Le Rire de la Méduse*, 1975/1976) Cixous launches a daring form of writing, daring because it puts forward new metaphors for writing (i.e. writing as childbirth or writing process as labor)⁶. The author becomes a mother, something that clashes with traditional western images where the author often is seen as male, and the text and child are set parallel to each other. Daring also because it mixes suggestive poetry with philosophical thinking, engaging storytelling with harsh argumentation and experience

⁴ Hélène Cixous, "Coming to writing" in "*Coming to writing*" and *Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 8 (my underlining).

⁵ Cixous, Hélène "De la scène de l'Inconscient à la scène de l'Histoire: Chemins d'une écriture" in *Hélène Cixous. Chemins d'une écriture*, edited by François Vachemins and Myriam Diaz-Diocretz (Paris: Presses Univeritaires de Vincennes, 1990), p. 16 (my translation from the French).

⁶ This has been thoroughly discussed among different Cixous-critics. One example is the Swedish literary critic Kerstin Munch who wrote a book spot on the theme: *Att föda text. En studie i Hélène Cixous författarskap* (Lund: Symposion, 2004).

based practice with analytical theorization. This is a conscious attempt to write the body and introduce a female way of writing. It is a rebellious way of writing, a way of writing capable of making women change history and speak for themselves: *l'écriture féminine* (woman's writing). Cixous encourages the reader to write herself, to let her body speak so that (even) the enormous resources of the subconscious can sprout: “Écrire-toi; il faut que ton corps se fasse entendre. Alors jailliront les immenses recources de l'inconscient”⁷. Too often this has been misinterpreted in an essentialist way (excluding men), but the point here is *the bodily form* of the writing, a writing that includes a severe critique of any dualistic way of thinking⁸.

From my standpoint this bodily way of writing sprouts from her own experience of being what I would like to call *a boundary body*. A body that transgresses borders through different nationalities, different languages, different appearances and different ways of expression. In her auto-biographical writings Cixous exposes her own body as a boundary with the aim of crystallizing her otherness as a female Jewish foreigner in Algeria. This is concretized in her néologisme ‘Juifemme’ (‘Jewoman’) as a token of her own predicament. At the same point, it is important to note that this body is not only a boundary, it is also a breakpoint. Cixous writes through and thanks to her body.

Her self-experienced otherness, as well as her meetings with other others, color her rebellious way of writing. One might even say that the notion of the other, or the desire to respect the other, is a central conception of *l'écriture féminine*. In contrast to “a masculine approach, with its tendency to master, to demonstrate, explain, grasp and lock away in a strongbox” the feminine writer (or, differently put, the bodily writer) is:

She 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, make the other gleam. Brings back to light that's been buried, fugitive, made too prudent. Illuminates it and sings in its names⁹.

⁷ Hélène Cixous, “Le Rire de la Méduse” (Paris: L'Arc, 1975), p. x.

⁸ Cixous' favorite example of this way of writing is the (male) French playwright Jean Genet, but her own source of inspiration is also Heidegger, cf Abigails Bray's analysis on Heidegger's influence on Cixous (*Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), eg. p 44–46). I have been writing more thoroughly on *l'écriture féminine* elsewhere, cf eg my articles “Reveries or Thruths: On the Betrayed Experience of the Child” in *Memories and Monuments* (red. Jonna Bornemark, Mattias Martinson, Jayne Svenungsson, Zurich/Berlin: LIT-Verlag, 2015), p. 115–126.

⁹ Hélène Cixous, “Coming to writing” in *“Coming to writing” and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 51.

The literary critic Susan Sellers even states that “(f)or Cixous this willingness to enable and sing the other, rather than appropriate the other’s difference in order to construct and glorify the self in accordance with masculine law, is the keynote of *écriture féminine*”¹⁰.

I would like to add another key concept of Cixous *écriture féminine*, namely *imagination*. The willingness to enable and sing the other, I would claim, is expressed in a special way. It is expressed through a thrilling trust in the human capability to imagine – or put differently, to think openly in (manifold) images – and actively take part in the poetical and political (re-) construction of a more inclusive philosophy of life.

Her suggestive fiction, largely built on the subconscious in forms of memories and dreams, often manages to destabilize the way of how one thinks and what one sees, even the very way of how one perceives one self. Even with small linguistic vehicles, she questions fundamental values. Let’s give an example. Cixous writes about *le fourmi*, a male ant, (in French, the ant is a female, *la fourmi*). A grammatically male ant is rare, it destabilizes, it provokes, it changes.

When *un fourmi* appears in my texts, it surprises me and it is surprising, this is inevitable. *Un fourmi* attracts attention; it puts into question: *la fourmi*, *le fourmi*, ourselves – everything. As soon as something of this type moves, everything vacillates. With *un fourmi*, one can make the world tremble, if you think about it. With, in addition, all that can be deployed as signifying associations: this is what Derrida does; he has gone very far straddling *un fourmi*¹¹.

Her sensuous narratives – permeated with word plays, symbols and voids – call for an immediate and indispensable reading response, or in Cixous’ own words, the act of *lire écrire* (translatable as *readwriting* or *writereading*). This means that you need to work with the text and participate in a relationship of encounter, courage, opening, discovery, change and exchange. Susan Sellers claims that reading Cixous is like “letting oneself be touched by the text, allowing emotions as well as the intellect to guide comprehension, reading with the body”¹². Another literary critic, Claudine Gaugan Fisher, argues as follows: “Pour

¹⁰ Sellers, Susan, *Hélène Cixous. Authorship, autobiography and love* (London: Polity Press, 1996), p. 10.

¹¹ Hélène Cixous in Hélène Cixous & Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints. Memory and Life Writing* (London: Routledge, 1997), p 63. In the Appedices to the text, excerpt 1, Jacques Derrida goes into a dialogue with Cixous’ grammatically male ant, *le fourmi*, and its potentialities (Jacques Derrida in *Rootprints. Memory and Life Writing*, p 119–127).

¹² Susan Sellers, “Tribute to Hélène Cixous”, in Susan Sellers’ blog, August 1, 2012, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://susansellers.wordpress.com/2012/08/01/tribute-to-helene-cixous/>.

lire HC, il faudrait revenir à cette obscure représentation primitive de l’enfant et oublier Descartes”¹³. I would say that Cixous’ writings actualizes a need to imitate a child’s way of perceiving the world, or, maybe, playing with it, to understand it¹⁴. One needs to use ones imagination to unfold the meaning of her multilayered texts that wants to “make the other gleam”. Often Cixous turns to animals to open our minds, open our willingness to imagine our reality anew. When describing herself as a child, marked by her own otherness, she is enclosed by other others and the reader needs to think creatively on – or imagining anew – human difference in relation to each other and to animals.

My first others were the Arabs, the scarabs, the French, The Germans. My first fellow beings were the hens, the rabbits, the Arabs, the Germans, etc. etc. And what language sang to me in my ears? There were languages: Spanish, Arab, German, French. Everything on this earth comes from a distance even the near. I listened to all languages. I sang in German. I also cackled with the hens¹⁵.

On equal terms, different human nationalities and different kinds of animals are set parallel to each other when presenting them all as *her* first others, there is a kind of personal or relational bound between the writer and *all* her others. On equal terms, she uses human language and animal language to communicate with all her others through her boundary body. The reader, a reader like me for example, can imagine a creative creature that crosses (normative) borders and succeeds in questioning the (often unproblematized) mechanistic border demarcation between human animals and other animals.

Memory and Forgetfulness

When reading the autobiographical texts of Cixous the meta-reflections on words/wording, writing and reading seem endless. Her meta-reflective reasoning is usually expressed in gerund, a continuous or progressive verb form that reflects

¹³ Claudine Gaugan Fisher, *La Cosmogonie d’Hélène Cixous* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), 5 (“To read HC, you have to get back to the obscure and primitive representation of a child and forget Descartes”, my translation from the French).

¹⁴ Cf my way of reasoning in Maria Essunger, “Reveries or Thruths: On the Betrayed Experience of the Child” in *Memories and Monuments* (red. Jonna Bornemark, Mattias Martinson, Jayne Svenungsson, Zurich/Berlin: LIT-Verlag, 2015), p. 115–126.

¹⁵ Hélène Cixous, “De la scène de l’Inconscient à la scène de l’Histoire: Chemins d’une écriture” in *Hélène Cixous. Chemins d’une écriture*, edited by François Vachemins and Myriam Diaz-Diocretz (Paris: Presses Univeritaires de Vincennes, 1990), p. 16 (my translation from the French).

continuity¹⁶. This stylistic marker embodies the understanding of writing and reading as ongoing acts. An ongoing creation here and now. Her cross genres texts, richly nuanced and thoroughly elaborated, all call to *live the instant*, knowing our shortcomings as human beings. Our human destiny, according to Cixous, is to be flesh of forgetting (*chair à l'oubli*), and “to have no more vivacious desire than to wrest one’s prey from forgetfulness, to keep the passing in the present”¹⁷. This fear of forgetting is fought throughout her entire oeuvre. An oeuvre that could be seen as a *living memory*; suggestive narrations filled with life-fragments and fictive catalyzers of thought. Repeatedly she re-tells the story of her life as boundary body, and, at the same time, as a recognized writing subject, a story that is a potential parallel story of other Others, other lives living on the border¹⁸.

One of the most known stories about otherness and the importance of memory in modern western literature is Franz Kafka’s short story from 1915 *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*)¹⁹, where a young salesman, Gregor Samsa, wakes up one morning and realizes that he has turned into a monstrous vermin. This is the starting point for an aesthetical and ethical discussion on the philosophical dilemma of how to define a human being. As Samsa’s bodily appearance now is that of a beetle, even if he still is a reflective subject equipped with a consciousness, one wonders if he’s still a human being? As he understands everything that is said around him, but is unable to utter anything but muddy sounds himself, and thereby is cut off from all forms of inter-human communication, one wonders if he’s still a human being? I would like to stress that he is, as long as his family *remembers* that he is Gregor Samsa. As soon as they seem to forget this and start confronting him not as a subject but as an object, a mute vermin, his humanity is taken away from him. Not only in the way the family treats him (taking away his furniture, throwing apples at him and finally sweeping him up like dirt once he stops breathing), but also in the way he perceives himself. Once the family members utter their viewpoint; that he is the other, the forgotten, the thing, he de-humanizes himself, acts more and more like the beast he is, and diminishes into dead dust. Naturally, the question to pose is who is (the most) human; the

¹⁶ Cf i.e. the title of one of her more known books: “*Coming to writing*” and *Other Essays* (1991) quoted above.

¹⁷ Hélène Cixous, “Writing blind: conversation with the donkey” in *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p 146.

¹⁸ Cf. e.g. the narratives of Cixous in *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage* and/or *Stigmata* – on remembering Fips, or Job the dog – (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2000b/London and New York: Routledge, 1998), *Dedans*- on remembering her dead father and her childhood – (Paris: Éditions Bernard Grasset, 1967) or *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là* – on remembering her son the dead – (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2000a).

¹⁹ Franz Kafka, *Die Verwandlung – Metamorphosis* (German-English Parallel Text, Milton Keynes: JiaHu Books, 2015).

reflecting, empathic and questioning non-human vermin or the inhuman family members, treating the other, or their own family, as a piece of dirt.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) has written on the problem of making human beings remember, giving them memories, and concludes that it is a painful history...

How do you give a memory to the animal, man? How do you impress something upon this partly dull, partly idiotic, inattentive mind, this personification of forgetfulness, so that it will stick? This age-old question was not resolved with gentle solutions and methods, as can be imagined; perhaps there is nothing more terrible and strange in man's prehistory than his *technique of mnemonics*. A thing must be burnt in so that it stays in the memory: only something that continues *to hurt* stays in the memory' – that is a proposition from the oldest (and unfortunately the longest-lived) psychology on earth²⁰.

But Nietzsche is also very clear about the importance of what he calls “active forgetfulness”. In *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1987, translated to Swedish: *Om moralens härstamning* 1905/1994) he underlines that forgetfulness is not only a *vis inertiae*, something slow and passive, it is, on the contrary, something active, a positive ability to avenging. This active forgetfulness is like a portress, *une consierge*, who maintains the order of the soul, he says, the order of calmness, of etiquette. I would express it, as we ought to be grateful to forgetfulness as it helps us digest the experiences of the past in just right bits and pieces. Forgetfulness, Nietzsche argues, is responsible for the fact that a great deal of our experiences that we absorb in ourselves do not enter our consciousness, at least not to any great extent.

To shut the doors and windows of consciousness for a while; not to be bothered by the noise and battle which our underworld of serviceable organs work with and against each other; a little peace, a little tabula rasa of consciousness to make room for something new, above all for the nobler functions and functionaries, for ruling, predicting, predetermining (our organism runs along oligarchic lines, you see) – that, as I said, is the benefit of active forgetfulness, like a doorkeeper or guardian of mental order, rest and etiquette: from which can immediately see how there could be no happiness, cheerfulness, hope, pride, immediacy, without forgetfulness.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007/1994, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson and translated by Carol Diethe), p. 38 (2nd essay, n0).

It is worth underlining that Cixous' writings are based on what I would like to call *elaborated* memories, they are not the experiences per se, they have been forgotten, re-actualized, re-formed and re-newed. Her experienced pain, grief and sorrow, or joy, love and hope, are filtered through restricting cultural and societal norms, as well as through her own aging, differently put, through her *boundary body* that have crossed national borders and sung in different languages. Moreover, according to Nietzsche's thinking, her experiences and memories are definitely filtered through her lifeguarding consciousness. However, the memories that, with time, break through despite – or thanks to – the active forgetfulness really do make room for something new. This sounds paradoxical, and it is. At the end of a short story, about a dead bird on a balcony and its power to disturb, and maybe forever change, the relationship between a cat and a cat-owner – or Thea and Cixous – this paradox is aesthetically described by Cixous.

*Now I am very tired, many tears have fowd under the bridge of time. I would like to write down that terrible thing that came to pass among us this morning, a shipwreck in my head, lumps of paving stone rattling around in my head, but I see that almost everything that we went through has been carried away by time. What came to pass has gone away, I've forgotten it all*²¹.

"I've forgotten it all" – still, the story is written, written with elaborated words, not pure experiences. For Cixous, words need to *witness the instant*, even if she does not write to keep that instant. She writes "to feel" and "to touch the body of the instant with the tips of the words"²². Human physics and intellectual practice are interwoven in her way of reasoning. And writing is creating and remembering in the face of death. Writing is making, writing is being, writing is a serious possibility of active partaking in life.

It is undoubtedly the death of my author that grafted in me the obligation to make sentences. I must write, or else the world will not exist. I must make, I must do everything: the morning, the world, the night, the day, the garden, the shopping, the childing, the countries; and I myself depend on this gesture. I write to replace the deceased author. I do not say the 'disappeared,' because he is not entirely disappeared: he returns. I cannot write: I must weave the (new) year's days (jours de l'an). Planting, constructing, raising... All of this is to keep death at a respectful distance.

²¹ Hélène Cixous, "Shared at dawn" in *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p 180.

²² Hélène Cixous, "Writing blind: conversation with the donkey", *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p 146.

*Death and I, we dialogize. It is not a desire for mastery or for triumph. It is the fabrication of the raft on nothingness*²³.

Listening and Hearing

Writing is also listening. In her essay “Writing blind: conversation with the donkey” (1996/1998) Cixous coins the word “*animot*”, her magical animal words (French: animal/animaux, mots), her “borderpass words”, the words which “cross the eyelid *on the interior* of their own body”, passwords that transgress borders²⁴. This neologism could be seen as a symbol of what I would like to call her ‘cross border thinking’. A thinking that loves the passage (French: pas sage in English means ill-behaved or unwise) and the open spaces in-between, challenging ready-made answers, limiting norms and captivating structures. Animals have a special place in the writings of Cixous, not only as provocative wordplays in her poetical texts, but as eye openers and philosophical friends in her critical thinking. Why should we give voice to the donkey that accompanies Abraham to the Mount of Moria? Why should we listen to the cat that we did not desire? Why should we reflect upon the suffering of a dog called Fips – an animal version of the suffering Job in the Hebrew Bible – and how do we respond to the question of a righteous creature’s suffering?

As a writer Cixous sees herself as an ideal donkey, someone who carries and hears. In French the verb “to hear” (ouïr/j’ouïs) is very similar to the verb “to enjoy” (jouir/je jouis), which unifies hearing with appreciation. Being born very myopic, Cixous is not a friend of broad daylight, which takes her by the eyes “and fills them with broad raw visions”. She puts it as follows: “I do not want to see what is shown. I want to see what is secret”²⁵. Moreover, one could say that she sees a lot through her ears:

I catch everything by the ear, the murmurs, the most enigmatic phrases and the angers also that convulse all my being when a drop of poison is served to me at the tympanum. Be careful because I hear all (tout et tout). All that is said. All that not being said is said otherwise²⁶.

²³ Hélène Cixous, “Writing blind: conversation with the donkey”, *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), *Ibid.*, p. 148 (my emphasis).

²⁴ Hélène Cixous, “Writing blind: conversation with the donkey”, *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁵ Hélène Cixous, “Writing blind: conversation with the donkey”, *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), *Ibid.*, p. 137.

²⁶ Hélène Cixous, “Writing blind: conversation with the donkey”, *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), *Ibid.*, p. 142.

The Bible does not say a word on the conversation between Abraham and the donkey as they walk the long way on Mount Moriah. According to Cixous this is not very surprising, but it's a great pity. Without the company of the donkey, the walk that is supposed to lead to Isaac's death would be infernal. Cixous wants to give the donkey with Abraham a chance to speak, to give a donkey the floor, as we can hear them talking when following the walk of the father and the animal. Why? Cixous has an answer:

One does not say foolish things (bêtises) to a donkey, do you agree? Nor to a cat. It is only to another human that one says foolish things, that one chats, that one strays from the point, that one lies. With the donkey, we ride straight to the essentials, and right away. I write on the donkey²⁷.

Maybe this is another way of questioning the big love story of the Judeo-Christian faith as it has been told through different religious traditions. Maybe there are other voices in this multilayered story that needs to be imagined or heard? What Abraham really thought, felt and uttered when walking on Mount Moriah may reside in the silenced donkey. To God, who is said to be fully human through incarnation, Abraham might have said foolish things, might even have lied, when affirming the offensive command to sacrifice his beloved son... The presence of the donkey puts an end to the self-destructive play directed by God.

If Cixous manages to hear the unheard story of the biblical donkey, she definitely hears unheard cats repeatedly, throughout her œuvre. In *Messie* (1996), and in *Stigmata* (1998), as well as in "The Cat's Arrival" (2006), Cixous presents the outcomes of a human meeting with a foreign cat. An existential event destabilizes a woman's perception of life and love. The decisive point is the unexpected perception of the cat – Thea is happening to the woman – forcing the woman into a sensual relationship with her. This cat is an example of the *humanimals* represented in the writings of Cixou²⁸, animals with languages and senses that question any distinct borders between homo sapiens and other animals. One should remember that according to Cixous, as according to Derrida, animals (might) speak and write: they leave traces: in the snow, through their bodies and

²⁷ Hélène Cixous, "Writing blind: conversation with the donkey", *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), *Ibid.*, p. 143. NB! In French, "bêtises" means foolish things, but it also alludes to the French word "bête" with double meanings, either animal or beast and, in a figurative sense, idiot.

²⁸ Cf the reasoning of Donna Haraway, i.e. in *When species meet*, where she elaborates on human nature as intersecting relationships and launches a critique of human exceptionalism (Minneapolis/London: Minneapolis University Press, 2008).

bites²⁹. The cat becomes the mistress, the mother, the lover of the woman, mostly due to Thea’s ability to place her life in the hands of the woman without suspicion. This specific ability of certain animals could be seen as a kind of powerful passivity that challenges normative structures (philosophical, theological and societal). It is not by force but by trust, dependence and tenderness that the animals manage to change history, at least the history of certain lives. Cixous’ cat Thea also manages to explain humanity to her. Cixous asks herself: “Who would have believed that I could love an animal and imitate a she-cat? And now I believe. I have already learned a lot from her. She brings me closer to the formation of the soul”³⁰. Certain characteristics of animals, or what one could call “animality” (cf. humanity), seem to represent desirable qualities for the human being.

Certain animals also functions as critical tools for our minds and hearts. Taking one of her starting points in one of the main thoughts of St. Augustine, and what could be called his “aesthetic successors” James Joyce and Jean Genet, Cixous writes vividly on the importance of *Felix Culpa*, a happy fault. According to Cixous the wound to Genet is the very “founding secret of all creation”³¹. The other point of departure for her discussions on the memory and meaning of the fault, and not at least, the faults contribution to the future, is her dog, Fips. One should notice that the *culpa* in the writings of Cixous is not (only) an unpretentious mistake, but rather a phenomenon of consciously felt guilt. She writes about Fips in a novel called *Reveries of the wild woman*, and in an essay with the re-

²⁹ One should remember that according to Cixous, as according to Derrida, animals (might) speak and write: they leave traces, cf. eg. Hélène Cixous, “Jacques Derrida: Co-Responding Voix You”, *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, ed. P. Cheah and S. Guerlac (Duke: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 43: “the whole machine that tends to replace the word ‘writing’ in the ordinary sense by ‘trace’ or the word ‘speech’ by trace, had as its final purpose that writing, speech, trace are *not the proper characteristic of the human*. There is animal trace, animals write”. Or, when Derrida in 1997 coins the word “animot”, it’s not only because it rhymes with *animaux* (animals), but also, as the proximity between the seemingly contrary words *mot* (word) and *muet* (mute) suggest in French, in order to insist that words (*mots*) can be spelled out without a word, so that a cat, for instance, “might be [...] signifying in a language of mute traces, that is to say without word”, *The Animal*, 418 (<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0093-1896%28200224%2928%3A2%3C369%3ATATTIA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-9>). Derrida thus (re)interprets *animot* “after” Cixous, who made this pun in “Writing Blind. Conversations with the Donkey” (as discussed above in this text), first published in *TriQuarterly* 97 (1996) and republished in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (1998) 2005.

³⁰ Hélène Cixous, “Writing blind: conversation with the donkey”, *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 152.

³¹ Hélène Cixous, “Stigmata, or Job the dog” in *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 181.

vealing title “Stigmata, or Job the dog”³². In the midst of her turbulent childhood in Algiers, where she is literally living on the edge of the rage that portrays the relation between “Arabs”, the word of the French colonizers, and the “French” neighborhoods, another word from the colonial vocabulary, she and her brother gets a dog from their father – even if they would have preferred another sibling. The dog does not behave as it is supposed to, according to the children, it does not want to cuddle, nor sleep in a fancy basket. When the father dies one could say that the dog, for the children, dies as well. It is maltreated and when kids from the neighborhood harasses it, and them, none of the two children intervenes. Cixous betrays the dog and thereby she betrays herself, the exposed dog is herself. Finally Fips dies. Before death finishes his story he bites the daughter, Cixous, in her heel. This bite, along with the memories of Fips’ tragedy, is forgotten for a long time. But in time, Fips makes his way through the consciousness of Cixous, through the stigmatic wound that marks the author. Job the dog writes his story through a fault, a physical wound or a stigma, through the listening of a human being. One could say that he resurrects and makes a difference; Cixous learns how to love him – and thereby herself – not there and then, but later on.

Languages and bodies

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) has written extensively on language and translation and shares, over and above the interest for words and languages, a Jewish origin and the experience of being in exile with H el ene Cixous. I believe there is a common memento for both of them, namely the fight for the other, for the different, for the ones with vulnerable voices. *Benjamin, as well as Cixous, want to hear and listen to what in conventional terms are defined as mute*. In his suggestive and intriguing text “On the language as Such and on the Language of Man” (1916/1979) Benjamin presents not only the main principles of his translation theory, but also his odd and original, yet very constructive, concept of *the language of things*.

According to the German philosopher Kathrin Busch, Benjamin here puts forward “the thesis that not alone does translation operate between different languages, but that human language itself is generated by a translational process. Human language originally translated nothing other than the language of things”³³.

³² H el ene Cixous, *Les R evieries de la femme sauvage* (Paris:  ditions Galil ee, 2000b) and “Stigmata, or Job the dog” in *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

³³ Kathrin Busch, “The Language of Things and the Magic of Language”, published in *eicpc*, an international multilingual webjournal, translated by Mary O’Neill, access date 2016-05-26 (<http://eicpc.net/transversal/0107/busch/en>).

While the function of language normally is seen to be one in which things, as they are named, are transformed into objects that one can communicate and categorize. Benjamin counters, according to Busch, that this capacity is preceded by an act of reception. “To hear the language of things and then translate it is a condition of any naming process. This type of perception, which cannot itself be based on the transmission of linguistic content, is made possible by human language’s capacity for imitation or mimesis”. When extending the concept of language to the language of things Benjamin also introduces a certain characteristic of language as “magical”. Busch continues: “By postulating receptiveness as the necessary antecedent to any articulation, he asserts the existence of a passive condition in human speech. The usual relationship between humanity (active) and the object world (passive), once it is reversed in this way, is thus reinterpreted”³⁴. This broadening of the concept of language itself is expressed by Benjamin himself as follows: “Every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language /.../. It is possible to speak about a language of music and of sculpture, about a language of justice /.../ (or) a language of technology”³⁵. In Benjamin’s way of reasoning, things speak, thereby they also have a contagious effect on us, the language of things cannot be kept at a distance and this actualizes, according to Busch, and me, a “restriction of the human being’s self-determined ability to act”³⁶.

The political or ethical dimension of translation as a mimetic process derives precisely from the way in which the relation to the world is articulated and from the fact that this articulation cannot be attributed solely to the power of human beings³⁷.

Thinking of a language of things is not easy, it seems so different, even if intriguing or/and interesting. I would like to argue that Cixous’ animal-thinking, and her action to make present the language and writing of animals – *thereby questioning the definite border between human animals and other animals* – could be a conceptual bridge between our common understanding of language and

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man” in *Walter Benjamin. Selected writings. Volume 1 1913–1926* (ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1997, second edition), p. 62.

³⁶ Kathrin Busch, “The Language of Things and the Magic of Language”, published in *eipcp*, an international multilingual webjournal, translated by Mary O’Neill, access date 2016-05-26 (<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0107/busch/en>).

³⁷ Ibid.

Benjamin's radically extended, but as I see it, deeply needed, understanding³⁸. This is a challenging thought as we have, for a long time and even nowadays, treated animals as things. Today there is also a manifest tendency to treat our own bodies as (objectified) things. With Benjamin's way of perceiving reality, through Cixous' animal thinking, one could start re-imagining material in a more inclusive, living and puzzling way. We all share boundary bodies – material bodies, animal bodies and human bodies – that cut into each other. No item, no animal, no human animal is an island; we are all part of a greater and vulnerable whole.

Throughout her oeuvre, Cixous listens to and re-writes animal language and animal words. She even talks, in great accordance with Benjamin, of her “*magic animots*”, her animal-words, as mentioned earlier³⁹. She always names her critical animal-friends and it seems like they are the ones imposing their names on her. The name Thea is not a randomly chosen name, nor is Job the dog. Cixous, as well as Benjamin, question an anthropocentric worldview by letting the (other) mute speak and even write. Nevertheless, it is worth underlining that Cixous is not (at least not primarily) fighting for the rights of animals. Rather, she elaborates, aesthetically and ethically, on the possibilities of animals, or even better, the possibility of poetically expressed *animality*, to awaken the human mind and make her see herself anew. Consequently, this might as well strengthen animal rights.

The main point here is what can be seen as common strategies and the common goal of Cixous and Benjamin to envision – or differently put, to make all of us see with or own eyes – the potentiality of a greater inclusivity in our daily lives. From my point of view, they both struggle to promote a vision of a philosophy of life that invites all thinking, sounding and feeling creatures to be part of the reality that we all share, no matter how different forms it might take throughout the world. The common goal and strategies, as I see them and as actualized earlier in this text, are quite simple. It has to do with the need for the human animal to take a step backward and realize that her greatest task is to perceive, listen to and interpret the sound and words of her surrounding reality,

³⁸ This reasoning is to be extended (in a forthcoming article that will be published in the journal *Literature & Theology*, 2016/2017, preliminary entitled “*To hear the unheard – or re-imagining representation with Primo Levi and Hélène Cixous*”) in dialogue with Matthew Calarco. His clear treatment of the multilayered research field of animal studies – dividing the research in three distinct approaches, namely identity, difference and indistinction, will serve as a sounding board for my analyze of Cixous's position in this field. The most intriguing and interesting finding is that her position concerning our relation to animals and animal rights is neither to be classified as identification, nor difference or distinction. According to me she covers them all in her own way.

³⁹ Hélène Cixous, “Writing blind: conversation with the donkey”, *Stigmata. Escaping texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 140 (my underlining).

from things to animals. However, once our ears are open and the language of things as well as the dialogue with writing animals function, the human animal should start writing. *Whoever she is*. We all have the right to write. According to Cixous we even *ought* to write, write as we dream...

We should write as we dream; we should even try and write, we should all do it for ourselves, it's very healthy, because it's the only place where we never lie. At night we don't lie. Now if we think that our whole lives are built on lying-they are strange buildings-we should try and write as our dreams teach us; shamelessly, fearlessly, and by facing what is inside very human being-sheer violence, disgust, terror, shit, invention, poetry. In our dreams we are criminals; we kill, and we kill with a lot of enjoyment. But we are also the happiest people on earth; we make love as we never make love in life” (Hélène Cixous, *Difficult Joys*, p. 22).

Nevertheless, all texts, authors and readers are part of a complex network of hierarchical orders, power relations and restricting norms – visible or invisible, yet palpable. Therefore it is highly important to meet the intellectual and existential challenge exposed by Benjamin and Cixous to (try to) hear what *seems* mute, take a step backward and listen. Then we can use our imagination and create anew.

Cixous does not deliver a properly packed philosophy of life to cling to; no one who has read more than two lines of her multilayered oeuvre would disagree with this statement. She delivers a vivid network, a creative rhizome – if talking with Gilles Deleuze, Cixous’ adept and former colleague at the University of Paris VIII – of self-generating suggestive thinking actualizing different ways of performing the willingness to enable and sing the other⁴⁰. When it comes to the poetical, philosophical and political narratives of Cixous, one can not find a certain model, nor a specific theory, not even a well-defined concept to depart from. One is forced to think, and re-think, in your/my own way. This way of making great philosophy is often questioned, but important. The poetical way of writing – or the creative one or the bodily one if one prefers – expresses philosophical thinking in a different way. To work for a more inclusive philosophy of life, shared by many, one might turn to different kinds of philosophical expressions, maybe imaginative ones that vividly ask for a direct reader-response. Perchance we can

⁴⁰ The notion of rhizome, as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, can be seen as a model for understanding our society. Or as Mattson and Wallenstein expresses it: “a non-hierarchical structure of notions that procreates in all directions and invites to a multitude of modes of application, re-functions and inoculations” (my translation from Swedish), *Deleuze och mångfaldens veck*, red. Helena Mattson Sven-Olof Wallenstein (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2010), preface.

get some inspiring guiding in this work by the wording of Donna Haraway: “Stories are much bigger than ideologies. In that is our hope”⁴¹.

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⁴¹ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: dogs, people and significant otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), p.17.

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Summary

"The right to write – or imagining human difference anew with Hélène Cixous"

In the wake of the Holocaust, and in a transnational context, the French-Algerian philosopher Hélène Cixous (1937–) makes her Jewish voice heard by crossing borders and asking questions. Like an existential rumination she writes back and forth on what it means to be alive, to be different, amongst other (different) creatures. She acts through novels, theoretical essays, dramas and critical poetry when she, as I would like to put it, continuously imagines what it means to be human. Imagine is a proper word for describing her political and poetical philosophy as it is permeated by tentative thinking, acknowledged dreams and critical belief. To Cixous, writing is a way of existing, a way of repelling death – even if death is what makes us remember the richness and complexity of life – writing is good, it's "what never ends". However, writing is not painless, nor self-evident. There are constraints that may forbid you to write and for Cixous herself there were many: her sex, her origin, history (being a Jewish female foreigner in Algeria as well as in France). Nevertheless, the desire to write is dreadful, or as the literary critic Susan Rubin Suleiman puts it with reference to Cixous' way of writing, "desire is precisely what does not ask whether it has a 'right' to exist". In this article, I would like to introduce Cixous' way of writing as a way of imagining human difference anew. A way of making people think on their own, a way of being part of a continuous creation where dominant borders are crossed, hierarchical patterns are questioned and new forms of communication beyond words are envisioned. I do it through samples from the text universe of Cixous and in conversation with Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin.