**Telefoam: species on the shores of Cixous and Derrida**

‘[…] are there more telephones or animals in the life and works of Hélène Cixous?

Answer: animals are telephones and sometimes the other way around, and they multiply, in the prolifauny of all their animal, human and divine metamorphoses.’

(Derrida, 2006: 102)

**Telephoney**

Claire Colebrook’s otherwise positive review of *Resistance, Flight, Creation: Feminist Enactments of French Philosophy*, singled out Cixous’s chapter for hostile, even scornful remarks indexing the erratic reception of her work. First attacking her style by implication, holding her chapter or “essay” at a distance with the pincers of scare-quotes, Colebrook then suggests that, at best, such a work could only be a parody of how misogyny might defame feminism. The work in question was ‘From My Menagerie to Philosophy’. Only one quotation evidences what could draw such condemnation and it connects animals, telephones and the maternal: ‘The need to telephone has always existed because its vital to recall the mother. All mammals bear the trace of the first telephone cord.’ Readers such as Colebrook usually bring a patient sophistication to thought yet with Cixous reading stalls. Cixous explicitly rejects the pull of genre exerted by designations such as ‘the novel’ or ‘short story’, preferring what she names a more ‘theatrical’ ‘recollection’ of ‘scenes’. Voices are channeled, voices are interrupted: we are not sure who affirms what, whether there is a ‘first person’ or, if so, to what extent this figure coincides with the one who signs “Hélène Cixous”. She writes ‘I do not command. I do not concept’. As such I speak to Cixous’s poetics. Thus, this ‘telefoam line’ does not dial Cixous to connect with her thought more immediately. Rather it ushers a sibilant text convoking the scene of the shore as sound waves double those of the sea, as nature and culture overlap.

Bringing animals and the technology of the telephone together might put one in mind of the animal-machines of Descartes. Throw in the maternal and women too are aligned with what is precisely unhistorical. This may be the conclusion that Colebrook rightly finds offensive. Elissa Marder has precisely elaborated the pernicious fantasies of the maternal haunting the telephone in light of Avital Ronell’s diagnosis. For Marder and Ronell, it is the dominant configuration of technology that works to constrain the feminine, which consequently only surfaces symptomatically. The wager of ‘Telefoam’ is that there is the chance of something quite different being sounded in Cixous, something shared with Derrida’s deconstruction of the Cartesian prescription of response *or* reaction. Rather than maintain human exceptionalism – not least construed as that power which harnesses and instrumentalises technology, both insist on an ongoing complexity vis-à-vis what counts as the living that necessarily interweaves the repetition of the mechanical with what we call response and with what might be power.

If ‘the telephone has always existed because its vital to recall the mother,’ I take this to vouch for an originary technicity *and* that the mother is not buried in the ground of nature. The two cords, the telephone and the umbilicus, are both beholden not to the fantasy of pure communication or communion, but to the possibilities of disconnection, of unexpected connection, the work of traces not signifiers. The term ‘telephone’ should not be taken as a naïve anachronism, in denial of the ubiquity of mobile technology. Rather Cixous insists on the materiality of the sound of the voice, marking the ‘*tele,’* remarking the ‘*phonē’*. The ostensible clarity of the voice is thickened by the telefoam. It conjures ‘telephants’ and ‘telefauns’. Even if there is a kind of transmissibility between animal and telephonic figures as Derrida suggests, this cannot be confined to the Cartesian cage of the animal-machine. Cixous also dramatically addresses Telephone as a kind of character. Moreover, in some of the texts that pass between Cixous and Derrida on their work, their own conversations by telephone come to light as generative sources of thinking. Sonorous, these contexts are far from separate. As Eric Prenowitz observes, her address ‘*O téléphone’* brings in the double sense afforded by its ‘near homonym’ ‘*parler au* *télephone’,* that is, both speaking on and speaking to the telephone.

**Whomeland**

So, there must be a beach, a sea, a sky with all the paradoxes of the—impossible—limit, *nondemarcation* said Proust, this *topology of the incalculable* you say, so that a what can arrive. […] In a few pages the doggod Proteus will have sent reeling the question, What is a What? as well as the question, What is a dog?’ (Cixous, 2007: 392)

This ‘whomeland’ surfaces in Cixous’s dramatic discussion of Derrida’s protean prose. It is difficult to pronounce, throwing a questioning ‘whom’ into the ostensibly self-evident home. Who me? This land becomes unhomely, how did we ever think it otherwise. In turning to the ‘whomeland’, Cixous invokes the interview with Derrida called ‘Eating Well’, conducted by Jean Luc Nancy, as well as echoing her own advocacy of the ‘uncountry’ as an undoing of borders.

‘Eating Well’ took place for the journal *Topoi* under the thematic heading ‘Who Comes After the Subject?’. While the subject is nominally in question, Derrida finds it reinstalled in the maintenance of the titular ‘who’ and thus refuses ‘to see the ‘who’ restricted to the grammar of what we call Western language, nor even limited by what we believe to be the very humanity of language’. This matter of a ‘who’ or a ‘what’ is consequential indeed: managing what we eat as precisely a ‘what’ and not a ‘who’ is leashed to the symbolic effort to preserve humans from cannibalism. It is strongly implicated in what Derrida diagnoses as our failure to ‘sacrifice sacrifice’. It goes to the heart of an ethics that implicitly addresses indeed forms the human alone. Taking Levinas’s ethics that begin with the command ‘Thou shalt not kill’ as exemplary, Derrida does not ‘simply’ replace it with an unwieldy wider command such that ‘Thou shalt not kill the living in general’ but rather affirms that ‘One must eat well’. The posthumanist ethics of eating well displaces the human-centred logic that forbids murder while simultaneously condoning the loophole of a ‘non-criminal putting to death’ for those who fall out of the category of the ‘who’ to be sacrificed in the land of the ‘what’. Yet this ethics also complicates our symbolic ingestion of others since it is enmeshed in the practice of eating as a ‘metonymy for introjection’. Thus, a variation upon the uncanny haunts what it is to eat.

When Derrida writes that *‘everything* that happens at the edge of the orifices (of orality, but also of the ear, the eye-and all the ‘senses’ in general) the metonymy of ‘eating well’ [*bien manger*] would always be the rule’ he not only radically opens out the Levinasian ethics of the face. He also challenges the psychoanalytic emphasis on the mouth as that which predicts the human by virtue of speech as the supposedly unique signature of communication barred to non-human others, *and* troubles our effort to maintain a clean divide between actual and symbolic anthropophagy. If ‘one must eat’ not just to ingest nutrition but in order to psychically form a self but that this eating as metonymy of introjection is no longer singularly attached to the mouth, then other kinds of identification in excess of how we are habituated to think of human egos may ensue. Thus these edges metonymising introjection return us to unsure shores.

For rather than ‘simply’ break up the violent false singular of ‘the animal’ into a myriad of particular differences, each animal with their own distinct outline, or blend humans and animals into the same category entitled to the same rights, Derrida invokes the limit - *any* limit - as that which suffers from limitrophy. Limits cannot remain constant, cannot rein in a property. Thickened and multiplied, the animal thus becomes an *animot*, obliging the sound of a plural (*animaux*) and written attention to the word (*mot*). Naming the limit as that which ‘grows’ together with refusing a ‘frontal’ or oppositional attack on the ‘philosophical or common sense’ shoring up our sense of self as human was foreshadowed in *Margins of Philosophy*. There, the shore and the limit were already entangled with the problem of the margins, the place from which and to which Derrida writes. There, he was already ‘eating the margins’, already addressing an inevitable ‘*limitrophic* violence’ and also alerting us to the telephonic stakes of offsetting the phallogocentric subject of reason.

‘Tympan’, the opening chapter of *Margins,* dilates upon otographies that interlink technical and biological figures. The oblique stretch of the eardrum maximises vibrations. In vibrating, it effectively ‘grafts itself’ thereby ‘resist[ing] the concepts of machine or of nature, of break or of body, resist[ing] the metaphysics of castration’. Reading the site of what was the head of the human subject of reason as thus inevitably open to the other without being able to determine that other in advance, leads Derrida to the seashore. ‘Tympan’ inserts a long and otherwise unreferenced citation from Michel Leiris’s book *Scratches* into the slender right hand column tracking the whole length of Derrida’s ‘own’ text. This extract lets loose a series of spiraled forms from the intestines to snail shells to ‘the concha of the ear’. Later on, the concha returns. Repeating the gesture of defying ‘the concepts of break or of body’ the spiral of the other tympanum invoked by Derrida is both ‘closed in on itself *and* open to the sea’s path’. Unlike a more familiar psychoanalytic subscription to the trouble of the ear as that organ which can never shut and is destined thus to be always cast as the hole of castration anxiety, Derrida recasts this limit by playing upon the oblique, vibrating tympanum as open *and* closed, as a telefoam call.

**Telephantasm**

Now I write. Which is to say that in my black interior softness the rapid footsteps of an arriving book print themselves. (Cixous, 1997: 141)

As an epigraph to ‘From My Menagerie to Philosophy’ Cixous quotes Derrida from his text ‘What is Poetry?’. The latter is the text in which poetry curls itself into a ball, hiding without being able to see the oncoming vehicle that might run it over: poetry in the form of a hedgehog. Cixous then opens her text with the remark that ‘[a]nimals are becoming more and more important in [her] books’ and immediately installs the ass accompanying Abraham on Mount Moriah as a communicative presence rather than ‘simply’ a dumb beast of burden. She conjures their conversation as one on the telephone and plays on a homonym between proper and colloquial nouns common to English and French. This ass (*âne*) that is a donkey is shadowed by the colloquial English ass that is an idiot, in anticipation of Derrida’s use of ‘*bêtise’* rendered in English by David Wills as an ‘asinanity’.

Subsequently there is a ludicrous scene, kin to an anxiety nightmare, of a meeting between university colleagues in which our narrator defends poetry as the only thing that really counts only to find herself required to lecture on this very subject and thus, it is implied, anchor the term in conceptual precision. Here, in response to the poetry question Cixous connects the telephone and her cat, in resistance to the precision and the ideality of the concept. It is the way that they ‘resolved the question of the telephone’. It is an elementary communication between two living entities. The mother is named, but she ‘may also be a son a husband a lover’ and in this case a cat. Addressing their differences in communicability, Cixous has the cat using her body, grazing against her legs as a telephone, to call in for reassurance, while Cixous whistles her call in turn.

This brief communiqué between species resonates with Cixous’s related text, ‘Writing Blind: Conversation with the Donkey’. There figures of illumination such as ‘broad daylight’, inhibit her practice. Cixous abandons the ostensible clarity of the eyes for the sake of ‘becom[ing] a thing with pricked up ears’. With passion she seeks out a night, or the personified proper noun Night, and writing behind her eyelids where her own ‘*animots’* pass by. This night does not annihilate, it facilitates. In this night the touching communication of Cixous’s cat – ‘the cat whose cat I am’, resumes, only to incrementally evoke a donkey, and one connected to the ‘telephone exchange’. Subsequently she again invokes the donkey with Abraham and the conversation they, surely, must have had (again without mentioning Isaac, or the event of sacrifice commanded by God). Again her prose anticipates that of Derrida. On the one hand, Cixous has it that one only says ‘foolish things [*bêtises]*’ to other human beings, implicitly acknowledging that this trope of animal stupidity has nothing to do with animals. On the other hand she implies that these foolish things are lies, and that with animals one would rather ‘ride straight to the essentials’. Perhaps it starts to sound as if this repeats the tenacious opposition that Derrida traces in Lacan, namely that the capacity to lie is another proper ability of the human. ‘Writing Blind’ even involves a compact play on ‘duncity’ easily evoking the ‘*dansité’* that Derrida homes in on when pointing to the two loopholes in Lacan that allow animals to pretend - but not ‘pretend to pretend’ as humans are supposed to do through the signature of the signifier – namely, seduction and combat. ‘*Dansité’* straddles English and French, ‘dancity’, density, and the colloquially English word dense, meaning like a dunce.

Yet the alternative passage to chatting with humans, or making a *bêtise,* is the donkey riding ‘right away’. Write away: this is the movement to which Cixous submits. She may say she writes ‘on’ the donkey (like writing ‘on’ the telephone), yet this is under the aegis of ‘writing blind’. This cannot be reduced to the habitual and trivial abuse of animal figures as human alibis. Her process and her book may seem inane, anarchic, criminal to the ‘policeforce reader’ that she anticipates, but Cixous ‘exercises the right to invention’. In such invention, she ‘search[es] for one land’ but ‘find[s] another’. No prediction, no compass. Nicholas Royle even finds the force generated by the term ‘away’ to be a kind of signature of Cixous’s own deconstruction of presence, sufficiently pronounced to warrant titling his very essay on the topic ‘Away’. Her only common ground is the art of the cut: ‘All living beings, mammal or vegetable, know that one must cut and trim to relaunch life. Nip the quick. Harm to help.’

**O telephone**

I was in the process of writing: But the telephone rings. And I wrote: and it’s you (I mean the telephone itself). It was then that the telephone rang, this one here, and it was you. It was you! And I burst into laughter. (I must say I was not waiting for you). And it was you and I say to you: o my love I was in the middle of writing: but the telephone rings. And you say to me: no way! – I swear! I say with fervor. And you say to me: but are you sure this happens outside, or is it in the text?

Here, I cannot continue. I do not know where outside happens or if the text is inside, inside outside or if the text is itself outside, or if outside is in the text. This is what happens when one writes what happens. (Cixous, 1997: 143)

In this epigraph, taken from ‘Writing Blind’, it is not simply a matter of speaking on the telephone but of the telephone itself speaking. Who speaks? This implicit but crucially organizing question should confirm point of view, anchor a subject. Here the question ‘who speaks?’ surprises the ostensible point of view of the narrator. There is no simple personification of technology. The telephone asks a ludic question as to where ‘this’ happens, adding extra pressure to the establishment of point of view. Which ‘this’ is in question? This conversation? This talking telephone that interrupts? Is ‘this’ anything at all? Riffing on the infamous refrain of ‘there is no outside-text’, Cixous identifies the ‘this’ as what happens when one writes. Writing is that which confounds sides, confounds the shore, confounds nature and culture or technicity.

This moment in ‘Writing Blind’ bears resemblance to passages in ‘The Cat’s Arrival’ in which the cat speaks. Elementary critiques of representations of animals in literature might quickly zone in on such a familiar ruse for subordinating animal figures to human interests. However Cixous is careful to remark on this remarkable speech. The narrator elects to bathe Thea the cat, who has installed herself in the narrator’s heart and house despite protestations. Cleaning Thea, however is a denuding disaster in which her fur dissolves away completely, necessitating that the narrator cover her with a towel. Amid the echo of shame as their bodies are made if not the same then similarly in need of the modesty of clothing, Thea reproaches the narrator for ‘passing the limit’ and names her transgression as the ‘exaggera[tion of] love’. This speech thus reposes difference even in the guise of common communication. The first example is yet more striking since it is hot on the heels of the unfathomable titular event of the cat’s arrival. Unforeseen and unwelcomed, this essay begins with the narrator’s surprise that ‘the Event would be a cat’. Attempting to refuse to accommodate a foundling cat for any second longer than necessary the narrator takes this cat - who will become Thea - to her cousins’ house and leaves her there. But the cat, with a newly torn ear not only returns but ‘came to thank the hostess for saving her from the hell into which she herself had thrown her’. The alliteration and proximity between thanking and thinking in this section - Thea thanks the narrator, who wonders what way of thinking this might entail - demands to be read as deliberate. It presages the radical restaging of Heidegger’s ‘What is called thinking’ in Derrida. Writing ‘[t]he animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there’, Derrida challenges us not to repeat the cant of a definitive distinction between human and animal. Thea thinks and thanks and these things redouble the surprise that she be there at all, challenging anthropocentrism not simply by refusing to project human qualities upon non-human species, but questioning whether we can properly identify the *anthropos* as such. Crossing all manner of thresholds before the narrator realizes that some form of guest might be approaching, Thea’s sure-footed arrival signals all the elements of the ethics of an infinite hospitality common to Cixous and to Derrida.

The incredulous arrival of this cat is reiterated in ‘Writing Blind’ set a little more explicitly in the context of the ‘*always unexpected Messiah’*. There this cat is also bound up with the arrival of a book, likewise unexpected and unable to be booked in the present. There a chapter of a book is named as that which ‘could be called the imitation of the cat’. There it is the chapter that imitates the cat not the other way around. It is even a ‘barely weaned’ cat that yet grows and instructs you.

**Autobiographical Animals**

Being able to suffer is no longer a power: it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible. (Derrida, 2008: 28)

In 1997, at *L’Animal Autobiographique*, Derrida tracked the way in which the philosophically embedded division between the one who calls himself ‘man’ and that which he calls ‘the animal’ is shored up by the conceit of ability. Habitually Cartesian ‘man’ locates himself as the one with the ability to speak, to lie, to respond, to mourn and all the rest, while the reactive animal cannot. Deconstructing this division, Derrida asks his audience whether they themselves *can* respond. This unsettling gesture is familiar to us: writing of the death of Paul de Man, Derrida counter intuitively asked whether we have the *capacity* to mourn. How will we decide who or what to mourn, for how long, in what manner and how will we know when the work of mourning is complete? Capacity or ability as the proper of an intending subject is precisely what is in question. In his work on animals Derrida rather writes of the ability to suffer as a ‘possibility without power’ in which ‘[m]ortality resides’. Moreover this vulnerable finitude is a condition shared amongst the living.

In 1998 speaking again at Cerisy but this time in honour of Cixous, Derrida shows the intimacy of his reading of her work. Amongst and as much as bringing attention to the animals and the telephones, Derrida gives emphasis to a particular notion of ‘might [*puisse*]’, asserting that ‘[e]verywhere she *assays* a mighty power of the “might” . Ginette Michaud, in reference to Peggy Kamuf, links the ‘thought of ‘*puissance*” that Derrida invokes vis-à-vis Cixous with the force that he emphasizes in such […] texts as ‘Force and Signification’. Thus this is a force that breaks open context, breaks open signification: it is not a power given over to the hands of an individual to wield. Kamuf characterizes it as a ‘powerless power’ given Cixous’s use of the subjunctive. While Michaud does not understand this might in light of the ‘possibility without power’ in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ‘Telefoam’ connects the two. Perhaps Derrida himself more explicitly troubles the present indicative: to what, to where, to when does ‘the animal that therefore I am’ refer, when ‘I am’ is supplemented by ‘I am following’? Yet his insistence on the transformation of ability speaks to Cixous’s transformation of power into might in the subjunctive mood of that which is yet to occur. He even suggests that the English language assists the discernment of this transition given the homographic overlap of ‘might’ as possibility and ‘might’ as strength. If this *puissance* were to be graspable in the present it would vanish into the ether.

Talking on the telephone always appeals to the other. Constitutively ‘writing blind,’ the telephone, like a psychoanalytic session, eschews the face-to-face. The transported senses touched on in this paper take communication out of the immediacy of the present. Moreover, these ‘*animalséances’* do not only recollect the past or address trauma in psychoanalytic fashion but also open future connections and thus furnish surprise. During a telephone conversation between Cixous and Nicholas Royle, staged at the University of Sussex, she asks after some unexpected sounds on the line. Royle says that it is a seagull. Laughing she replies ‘can you imagine that I get her call!’.

Siding with the shores, treading in each other’s footsteps, our traces always able to be erased, these are the shores that we share.