

## Critical Reflection – Week 11

### At the Threshold of Species<sup>1</sup>: Writing Our Animal Selves

“It is facile, virtually meaningless to demand that literature sticks with the “human”. For the matter at stake is not “human” versus “inhuman” (in which choosing the “human” guarantees instant moral self-congratulations for both author and reader) but an infinitely varied register of forms and tonalities for transporting the human voice into prose narrative.”

Susan Sontag ‘The Pornographic Imagination’

Marie Darrieussecq’s *Pig Tales* is a novel about exactly that: the transporting of the human voice; and the birth of the writer through the discovery of her animal self, becoming pig becoming human. Who is the nameless protagonist at the centre of this unsettling and dramatic porcine metamorphosis? In the beginning, she is female object, human, inarticulate to give adequate expression to her experience of the world; but, gradually, she morphs before us, compelled to record the sufferings she endures, “to transcribe her strange ordeal”.<sup>2</sup> Darrieussecq portrays animality as an essential aspect of the writerly condition, a sensitive investigation of the contours of the self through “delicious” solitude (68) and concentrated observation. In *Creaturely Poetics*, Anat Pick highlights “the ironic gap between the narrator’s deficient (human) awareness and her acute (animal) sensitivity”.<sup>3</sup> The human reader, in such deficiency, can feel an acute longing, (for *Heimat*, if you will permit me) for the natural Animal state, a wish to return to an uncomplicated and sensuous immediacy of existence:

I began to eat. There were acorns and horse chestnuts...The acorns were especially delicious, with something like a faint flavour of virgin soil. They cracked between the teeth, the fibres softened in the saliva...I had a strong taste of earth and water in my mouth, the taste of the forest, of dead leaves. There were lots of roots, too, smelling nicely of liquorice,

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<sup>1</sup> “At the threshold of species, *écriture de cochon* recasts humanity along other lines: corporeal, nomadic and debased. Writing, like vision, enacts the becoming human and ...must transcribe its own otherness in order to become human.”

<sup>2</sup> Pick, Anat. *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film.*, Columbia University Press 2011, pg 79

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 92

witch hazel, gentian, and they slipped down my throat like a sweet desert, festooning me with long strands of sugary drool. Belching gently, I stuck out my tongue and licked my chops. (58)

In her pig-becoming - what Jacques Derrida describes as “moving from the ends of man to the crossing of borders between man and animal”<sup>4</sup> - the narrator takes possession of a new language and, with it, a newfound power of testimony and self-liberation. For Deleuze and Guattari, writing and the discovery of a new language pass through the animal and through the woman; that is, they literally entail a re- or disfiguring of the human<sup>5</sup>. This, we discover elsewhere in the transportive, dreamlike poetic-scapes of Hélène Cardona’s *Dreaming my Animal Selves*:

the familiar creatures that we know like swans and fish and horses are spoken of in the same breath as centaurs and mermaids and elves. And while these mythological beings are not animals per se, we are, of course, aware that centaurs and mermaids are part one thing and part another, creatures belonging to two worlds<sup>6</sup>.

Straddling the abyss between these two worlds - *bios* and *zoé*<sup>7</sup> - the imaginative threshold work of the writer (in this case, Darrieussecq and Cardona) neither mourns the human nor stresses the melancholic Benjaminian fate of the voiceless animal<sup>8</sup>, but may derive from each realm respectively its animal embodiment and human spirituality, to perfectly express the crisis of human consciousness.

“*il peut faire du vent, accroche-toi. / Tu apprends à vivre dans deux mondes à la fois.*”<sup>9</sup>

from ‘L’île des Immortels’

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg 100

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pg 93.

<sup>6</sup> Finstrom, Jennifer. “The Language of Becoming: Transformation Through Holding On and Letting Go” <https://bluefifthreview.wordpress.com/2016/05/04/spring-quarterly-spring-2016-16-4/> [accessed 4 April 2019]

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, Jacques, and David Wills. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Edited by Marie-Louise Mallet, Fordham University, 2008. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x09fn](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x09fn), pg 393

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pg 388

<sup>9</sup> “*it can be windy, hang on to me. / You’re learning to live in two worlds at once*”. Cardona, Hélène. *Dreaming My Animal Selves = Le Songe de Mes Ames Animales : a Bilingual Collection*. Salmonpoetry, 2013.

**Bio**

This critical reflection was written by Evelyn Moriarty who is a student on the M.A. in Comparative Literature & Cultural Studies at University of Limerick, Ireland for a module entitled 'Textual Constructions of Cultural Identity'.