

LIFE, WOULD THAT IT MIGHT BE TO SAY—POWER METAPHOR, *TRAGEN*, *ÉPUI(S)EMENT*

Abstract

In *Insister*—À Jacques Derrida Cixous declares that she will have to write ‘the book of words’, among which ‘words of power’ will be *vermögen* (to be able), together with *Unvermöglichkeit* (impossibility), and *tragen* (to carry), along with *austragen* (to bear to term) and *übertragen* (to transfer, translate, also in the sense of metaphor). By examining Derrida’s reading of Cixous in *H. C. pour la vie, c’est à dire. . .* this article deepens the association of *tragen* with life and power that fascinates Derrida in the second year of his final seminar where he tracks a thread between *Austrag*, *Walten*, *Trieb*, and *Vermögen*. Its point of departure is a passage towards the end of *H. C. pour la vie* where Derrida speaks of the trap of metalanguage or, rather, metaphrasis that lurks in the *c’est* of *c’est à dire*. I link this passage both to the discussion of metaphorization in the earlier ‘Le puits et la pyramide’ and the characterization of *puisse* as ‘the exhaustion [*l’épuisement*] of the sun before its time’ in the essay on Cixous to associate *puissance* with the wearing-out of the world and its *usure* in the double sense elaborated in ‘La mythologie blanche’.

Keywords

Power; metaphor; Derrida; Cixous; *puissance*; *Walten*

Metaphrasis

I find myself before a trap I have set myself. I first drafted the abstract for the conference paper that would become this article in the autumn of 2019. Since I presented the paper in June 2022, another year has elapsed. In that interval of nearly four years some of those ideas have since appeared elsewhere in print, never quite the same, always in a constant process of re-writing and re-thinking, like a woven braid as the months passed. Come today, then, I find myself – or since ‘today’ is when you read what I write in anticipating that reading – I *will have* found myself in the position of having to read myself, paraphrase, translate myself, of having to say something like: ‘Yes, I’m telling you, that is indeed what it means, the truth of what I wrote, and that you will or will not have read, the truth that I can now draw out, that’s what it is.’ That is, I am trapped into countersigning my own words with something like a ‘that is to say,’ a ‘*c’est à dire*.’ I do not waste words on this preamble lightly but because it seems important to the argument that will unfold to ponder whether this logic represents some kind of interminable death, the prosthetic exhaustion of the word, which must repeatedly supplement and extend itself, or simply the life of thought as it carries itself over and survives itself and/in its death?

According to this prosthetic logic, this *c’est à dire* is not mine, not originally. Rather, it comes to me from the other and, moreover, from another other. And what I want to say about life, *puissance*, *tragen* is also countersigns this *c’est à dire* to a number of texts signed by an other, themselves counter-signing another other, Jacques countersigning Hélène, Peggy countersigning Jacques’ countersignature, all kinds of crossed wires and transferences – and *résistances de transfrères*, as Hélène might say – among Thomas, Francesco, Mauro, Peggy. I listen in, and I *over*-hear in the

sense of eavesdropping but also hearing too much so as to risk mis(sing)hearing.

Hélène and Jacques are often on the phone, mis(sing) hearing one another a little, translating and paraphrasing one another each at their end of the line, but not as badly, Jacques thinks, as others mishear her, ensnared as they are in their own unconscious *transfrèrances*. Notwithstanding her fame and global recognition, there is, he laments towards the end of *H. C. pour la vie, c'est à dire*, 'an irredentist resistance to reading' her (Derrida 2002, ??/2006, 136). Using the formulation of the jussive subjunctive that encapsulates Cixous' understanding of power or might, he quips: 'Would that it might be analyzed one day.' Derrida then proceeds to work through four traps facing any attempt to overcome the resistances to reading Cixous and in which this 'interminable analysis' might all too easily fall. The first is the misogyny or phallogocentrism in the academy, in the media, and so on, that refuses to recognize might on the other side of sexual difference even when it pretends or imagines itself to escape this horizon. What this posture avoids or represses is what Derrida has been describing, with a sonic metaphor, as the 'enchanted chant' of Cixous's untranslatable idiom whose genealogical braid of substitutable homophonies at once unsettles the patriarchal logic of filiation, the logic of gender as much as of genre. The second trap is an internal one, the resistance of friends and allies, including self-resistance - the resistance of Cixous who is herself not immune to these effects and the resistance of resistance resisting itself and hence always being more or less resistant, differentially resistant. The sonic metaphor takes on a stronger force: 'One sometimes celebrates and recognizes with a view to not hearing, not letting one hear, or not giving one to hear, to the point of silencing' (??/141). The third trap is summed up in the notion of '*anankè*' that is the

title of one of Cixous's books: in this case the 'yes' of jussory enjoyment and might exposes itself to the difference in might and hence to its opposite - to the impotence of death or fate.

It is the fourth and final trap that detains me here. Drawing out the homophonic wordplay of the essay's title, this trap is metalanguage or metaphrase, in the passage of the *c'est à dire* that plagues the genesis of this article.

Metaphrasis is the Greek word for translation [*traduction*], what passes [*qui passe*] from one language or one phrase to the other by the transference [*transfert*] of a 'that is to say [*c'est à dire*].' *Metaphrasô*: I transport [*transporte*] from one phrase or one language into another, I paraphrase, I periphraise, I translate [*je paraphrase, je périphrase, je traduis*], I work through [*je passe par*] the metaphrastic copula of a 'that is [*c'est*],' through the operator of a 'that is to say [*c'est à dire*].' (Derrida 2002, 123/2006, 142)

Referring to this other language in which I have snookered myself into writing and 'which must at once be other in countersigning what it listens to and metaphrases as it speaks [*qui doit à la fois être autre en contresignant ce qu'il écoute et métaphrase en parlant*]', Derrida argues that 'it is not enough to read [*il ne suffit pas de lire*]' (123/143) Rather, 'one must do something, make let something happen/arrive while speaking about something, even while speaking another language on the subject of another language [*il faut . . . faire quelque chose, faire laisser arriver quelque chose en parlant de quelque chose, voire en parlant un autre langage au sujet d'un autre langage*].' On the one hand, this confirms that there is no place for metalanguage. And yet on the other hand (and here it is important one one

read/hear in full in the French to grasp all the wordplay and metaphrasis at work in this crucial thinking on the might of the letter in Cixous:

Il y a aussi une nécessité du métalangage, c'est à dire d'un langage qui parle d'un langage, le sien ou un autre, ne fût-ce que pour en entendre le sens et donner à entendre la loi, voire la formaliser. Simplement, à titre d'effet, ce moment métaphrastique, se trouve compris dans le différentiel des puissances du *puisse*. Un métalangage ou une métaphore tend toujours à surenchérir et à excéder en puissance le « puisse » sans lequel il puise et au-dessus du puits duquel il prétend s'élever pour en dire la vérité. Pour sortir la vérité du puits. La vérité de l'essence, ce qu'on dit quand on dit *c'est*, c'est seulement une instance dans le différentiel des intensités de puissance. Le « c'est » du « c'est à dire » c'est souvent le plus puissant. « C'est ainsi, comme on dit, voilà ce que c'est, je vous le dis ; c'est bien ça qu'elle fait ou qu'elle veut dire, fût-ce un prodige ou un miracle, constatons-la, sachons-le. » Mais plus puissant que ce dont le « c'est » parle, le « c'est », le « c'est à dire » reste encore une puissance, un phénomène de puissance. Cela nous remet sur la voie d'une puissance qu'il s'agit de penser avant et au cœur de toute prétendue volonté de puissance ou possibilité du pouvoir. (2002, 123)

There is also a necessity for metalanguage, that is to say, for a language that speaks of a language, its own or another, if only to hear/understand its meaning and give one to hear/understand its law, even formalize it. Simply, as an effect, this metaphrastic moment is comprehended in the differential of the mighty powers of might. A metalanguage or a metaphor always tends to overbid and exceed in might the 'might' from which it draws and above whose well it claims to rise in order to speak its truth. To get the truth out of the well. The truth of the essence, what one says when one says *it/that is* [*c'est*], is only an agency in the differential of the intensities of power. The "that is" of the "that is to say" is often the most powerful. "It is so, as one says, that's what it is, I'm telling you;

that's indeed what it does or what it means, even if it is a prodigy or a miracle, let us note and let us be aware." But mightier than what the "that is" speaks about, the "that is," "that is to say" still remains a mighty power, a phenomenon of power. This puts us back on the track of a mighty power that must be thought before and at the heart of any so-called will to power or possibility of the "might." (2006, 143-44)

There is so much to disentangle in this dense and rich passage. The intersection of a thought *of* power with thought *as* power is a potent one. The first point I want to underscore for our present purposes, however, is that metaphrasis is not only necessary for *entendre* (as if it were necessary to talk around, explain, paraphrase, to make an idea intelligible) but that this irreducibility derives from the fundamentally differential character of power in Derrida's analysis. Specifically, Derrida this differential nature of power as a kind of competition among powers, of one power outbidding and overpowering another. The *c'est à dire*, insofar as it marks the power that undergirds each of these overbids, operates as a quasi-transcendental power that prevails over all other powers and that precedes any particular power and any particular 'I can', any capacity or possibility that can fall incident to a subject. Following a Cixousian analytic of power, this originary might has the grammatical form of the jussive subjunction *puisse* - would that it be might be!

The second point to highlight is the connection between this arch-originary *puisse* and the metaphrasis or metaphorization that takes places in the *c'est à dire*. There is a particular metaphor at work in Derrida's figuring of this metaphorization: namely, that of drawing water out of a well. Revelling in quasi-homophonic effects, Derrida proposes that the might of the metaphrastic *c'est à dire* is mightier than the might [*puisse*] it draws [*puise*]

out of the well [*du puits*]. But this is not the only metaphor that Derrida will use to point to the power of metaphORIZATION. Elsewhere it is less a metaphor of drawing than of pushing: of *physis* or of *puissance* as *poussance*. What I say here in this way articulates a certain *c'est à dire* in relation to Peggy Kamuf's paper given at the same Derrida Today conference in 2022 (Kamuf 2023). We shall leap back to Peggy's text further down the road once we have approached one of its preoccupations head on.

Hypersovereignty

The description of a metaphrastic outbidding bears striking resemblance to how Derrida argues in his final seminar that sovereignty, far from being pure, is a differential power, the dynamics of a 'hyperbolic upping of the ante' (2008, 307/2009, 230). In the first year of *La bête et le souverain* it is not simply that there is a sovereignty more sovereign than other sovereignties but that sovereignty *just is* this quasi-infinite outbidding or, to echo the vocabulary of *H. C. pour la vie* and to draw closer to the driving metaphors on which Kamuf seizes, this precipitous outspeeding, overtaking, *doubler*, of power that surpasses itself on the spot. Having observed in the penultimate session of the first year of the seminar that the gathering of *logos* is not without a certain force or violence (2008, 425/ 2009, 319), in the second year Derrida extensively analyses this question of what prevails or reigns through the Heideggerian lens of *Walten* (the destination of all of Kamuf's leaping along a somewhat different road). This gives Derrida the opportunity to test the limits of sovereign power since *Walten* is not simply a violent power or upsurge but the *Überwältigende*, the overpowering or prepotent power that elevates itself above, dominates, prevails over, outlives (2010, 391-92/2011, 286). Before this, in the second session, Derrida quotes Heidegger: '*Physis*

means this whole *Walten* that prevails [*durchwaltet*] through man himself and over which he has no power, of which he is not the master but which precisely reigns (dominates) through him and around him [*gerade ihn durch- und unwaltet*]’ (75/41). Derrida suggests that Heidegger’s neologism *umwalten* might even be translated as ‘undoing’ or ‘unravelling’.

The question of predominant power and what would keep it in check comes to head in the final moments of the seminar.

Heidegger writes this, which seems to mark the absolute limit of *Gewalt* or of *Gewalt-tätigkeit*. It’s about what will basically have been besieging this seminar . . . death itself, if there be any [*la mort elle-même, s’il y en a*], was our theme. Heidegger writes this, but I’m not sure that I will read it as he writes it or interpret it as he auto-interprets it—we would have to reconstitute the whole passage: “*Nur an einem* [underlined] *scheitert alle Gewalt- tätigkeit unmittelbar* (There is only one thing against which all violence- doing, violent action, violent activity, immediately shatters [*Il n’y a qu’une seule chose qui fasse échec, immédiatement, un faire-violence, à l’action violente, à l’activité violente*]).” Notice that, as much as the failure and limit of violence, of the outbidding of *Walten*, of *Gewalt*, what seems to count here is immediacy, what is immediate in this limit that imposes failure on *Gewalt* and *Walten* (*unmittelbar* is the last word). . . . “*Das ist der Tod* (it is death).”

The question, that was the question of the seminar, remains entire: namely that of knowing who can die. To whom is this power given or denied? Who is capable of death [*qui peut la mort*], and, through death, of imposing failure on [*mettre en échec* - putting in check] the super- or hyper-sovereignty [*la super- ou l’hyper-souveraineté*] of *Walten*? (2010, 396-97/2011, 290

When Derrida reflects that he's not sure that he will read it as Heidegger writes it and that one would have to reconstitute the whole passage, he is thus putting us on guard that there will be an irreducible *c'est à dire* or metaphrastic translation of Heidegger. This will entail a certain translation of the possibility at stake in the concluding question into a power or might that departs from or resists the horizon of the possible. For Kamuf, it is a certain pushing or propulsive force or *poussance* that drives the leaps of interpretation and also the leap from the sensible into the suprasensible that is at stake in the transferential dynamic of metaphor (2023, 38). When she associates the leap (back) from power (*Vermögen*) to possibility (*Möglichkeit*) with the *surgissement* or surging up of *Walten*, the metaphoricity begins to resonate more closely with that of the well. Both the leap and the drawing up or surging of water from the depths share, of course, a metaphoricity of depth or verticality, but we should not be too quick to assimilate Cixous's *puisse* to an abundance of nature or life-force surging forth, or indeed to the Freudian drive.

The concluding question of Derrida's final seminar, at first blush perplexing, should be understood against the backdrop that for Heidegger authentic life is less an exuberant, generative life-force than the relation to death *as such* and to that extent just is the possibility of death - which is to say, the possibility of impossibility, the capacity for non-power, the mastery of the impossible as being-for-death. But the outbidding is here prematurely cut-off for Derrida, who wants to up the ante further in order to think what would prevail even over *Walten* as what prevails, a power more powerful than the possibility of the impossible. This would be the *impossibility* of the possible *and* of the impossible - and of their opposition, of the opposition between Being and beings in the ontological difference born of *Walten*. That

is to say, Cixous's *puisse* or *puissance* is the impossibility of any relation to or mastery of life or death *as such* and the impossibility of deciding – in her fictionalized debate with Derrida, for example—between the sides of life and death. What Derrida elsewhere calls *la vie la mort* (life-death) is inappropriable; its power already comes irreducibly from the other. In other words, *la vie la mort* is always minimally metaphrastic insofar as it is differential.

Walten is quasi-infinite to the extent that there is no external limit on its power. And yet it is precisely because this power is self-differentiating that *Walten* cannot appear as such. If for Heidegger *Walten* comes to presence in the *logos*, for Derrida it is precisely because it outdoes itself that it holds itself in check: the more this self-differentiating power tends to divide itself between the impossible and the possible, between life and death, Being and beings, it necessarily destroys itself in becoming other than itself. Only by becoming impotent does it save itself from complete exhaustion. In Cixous's use of the jussive subjunctive *puisse* Derrida discerns a transfiguration of sorts of this power that prevails over itself in its impotence. In a passage culminating in a striking metaphor – a metaphor that strikes, moreover, at all metaphor insofar as it is irreducibly heliotropic, everything turning irreplaceably around the sun and yet everything under the sun affected by the unavoidably periphrastic and prosthetic references to the sensible sun – so in this passage ending with (the ending of) the sun, Derrida analyses this power of life no longer opposed to death as a performativity that prevails over, oubids, the performative:

Puisse forme et constitue un événement en soi, c'est même le performatif par excellence, la performativité d'un performatif qui précède et conditionne tout autre performatif et donc tout événement ; il n'y a pas de

performatif qui n'implique un « puisse cela arriver », « puisse-t-il » ou « puisse-t-elle arriver ». Mais il y a des événements qui ne sont pas liés à des performatifs, et ce sont même les événementiels des événements, ceux qui nous arrivent, et les arrivants qui nous arrivent là où nous ne performons plus rien, malgré tout performatif possible : voilà le lieu de l'impossible nécessaire, de l'*anankè* ou de la *tukhè*, du sort, de l'impuissance qui n'est pas le contraire du possible et de la puissance. Ni promesse ni attente messianique, l'in-forme, pas même ma monstruosité : la vie la mort, l'épuisement du soleil avant l'heure ou une prothèse définitive du soleil.

Might forms and constitutes an event in itself; it is even the performative par excellence, the performativity of a performative that precedes and conditions any other performative and therefore any event; there is no performative that does not imply a 'would that might happen/arrive,' 'would it, he, she, might happen/arrive.' But there are events that are not connected to performatives, and these are even the most event-like events, those that happen or arrive to us, and the *arrivants* who happen/arrive to us where we do not perform anything any longer, despite any possible performative: such is the place of the necessary impossible, of *anankè* or of *tukhè*, of fate, of impotence, which is not the opposite of the possible and of potency. Neither a promise nor a messianic expectation, the un-formed, not even my monstrosity: life death, the exhaustion of the sun before its time or a definitive prosthesis of the sun. (Derrida 2002, 116/2006, 134)

Whereas Heidegger thinks the *logos* as a 'self-authorized performative' that exposes and liberates an otherwise hidden *Walten*, (Derrida 2010, 75-86/2011, 42), Cixousian hyper-performativity exceeds this horizon of being, of the 'as such.' Her being-*for-life* is not the symmetrical counterpart of the Heideggerian *Sein-zum-Tode* but rather the prostheticity that (in)animates life. Focusing on the question of metaphrasis or metamorphization opens up

the possibilities for expanding on or steering in other directions astute analyses of *puissance* as something other than possibilization or a drive to power by Thomas Clément Mercier (2018), Francesco Vitale (2020), and Maura Senatore (2019). To better comprehend this prosthesis of the (im)possible that comes from the other and its intimacy with the countersigning *c'est à dire* requires turns less to the surfeit than to the exhaustion of metaphorization, referenced in elliptical fashion at the end of this passage. If I thereby paraphrase Kamuf, it is to hear not only the wellspring of life but also the burnout in metaphor: to say *puissance*, *poussance*, *c'est à dire épuisement*.

The world's exhaustion

In *Insister*—À Jacques Derrida Cixous declares that she will have to write 'the book of words', among which 'words of power, magic words, passwords' she includes *vermögen* (to be able), together with *Unvermöglichkeit* (impossibility) and *mögen* ('*vouloir et pouvoir*' in Cixous's gloss), and *tragen* (to carry), along with *austragen* (to bear to term) and *übertragen* (to transfer, translate, also in the sense of metaphor) (Cixous 2006, 57-58/2007 74). Cixous thus makes a link between power and the passage of metaphorical transfer. To the extent that *Walten* introduces displacement into the very heart of sovereignty, as Laura Odello (2017) suggests, or, in Michael Naas' words, is 'destined from the start to give way to the other, that is, to the movement of *différance*, to the reign or sway of the other's *Walten*' (Naas 2015, 158), *Walten* might even be heard as another nonsynonymous substitution for *différance*, dissemination, autoimmunity - *c'est à dire* the metaphoricity that Derrida once dubbed 'the animality of the letter' and the '*sur-puissance* of life' (Derrida 1967, 108-9/1978, 72-73).

In the eleventh session of seminar's first year Derrida suggests that the struggle *for* sovereignty conforms to a *differential* and *transferential* economy and that our attention should thus be redirected away from the purported purity or indivisibility of sovereignty to 'concepts such as drive, transference, transition, translation, passage, division [*des concepts telles que pulsion, transfert, transition, transduction, passage, partage*]' (Derrida 2008, 388/2009, 290-91) - in short, to the order of the *c'est à dire* or of metalanguage. In a similar way, Cixous shows the way towards a notion of life-*for*-life shot through with transferential drives and 'econo-homonymy,' as Derrida puts it, substituting one vocable for another on the spot (Derrida 2002, 67/2006, 73).

In this context one might draw closer to the link between performative power and the rich lexical family of *tragen*, which features prominently in *La bête et le souverain* in two intertwined guises, spanning the poles of birth and mourning: the term *Austrag*, referring to carrying a baby to term but used by Heidegger to describe the disjunct coupling of ontological difference in which *Walten waltet*, and Celan's line 'Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen [The world is gone or far off, I must carry you]'. Insofar as *Dasein* is capable of death that, unlike the animal or the stone, he has a world. But one upshot of the deconstruction of *Walten* is to suggest that life, whether human, animal, or inorganic, is characterized by an originary worldlessness. Building on the reading of this line in *Béliers*, the final seminar puts under pressure not merely on the anthropocentric categories that divide *weltbildende* (world-forming) *Dasein* from the *weltarm* (poor-in-world) animal or *weltlos* (worldless) stone but the entire notion of world. I must carry you because there is no longer any world - not just a particular world, but the possibility of the world in general (Derrida 2010, 359/ 2011, 259-60) -

because the world is, done, done for, gone to hell, *fichu* as Cixous might say. So either I carry you out of the fucked-up, over-heating world or I carry you in such a way as to make it *as if* another world were possible. But perhaps the world has always been nothing but a fiction. 'Perhaps there is too much world in the world, but who can assure us that there is a world? Perhaps there is no world. Not yet and perhaps not since ever and perhaps not ever' (367/266).

This meditation somewhat resembles the logic of the *plus de* mobilized in 'La mythologie blanche' (1972/1990) to describe the operation of metaphor as *usure* in the double sense of erasure by rubbing away (the face of the coin), crumbling away, or exhaustion (*épuisement*) and of producing surplus value such that *no more* metaphor is always *one more* metaphor. *Übertragen* describes the traditional concept of metaphORIZATION as a process of wearing away or exhausting sensible immediacy to allow for the passage to the intelligibility and exchangeability of the concept. In describing the same movement of the sign in 'Le puits et la pyramide' (1972/1990) Derrida deploys the metaphor of the pit or well whose dark, silent reservoir is conserved, encrypted, and sublated –which is to say, carried over – into a tomb-like pyramid, a monument of life-in-death and death-in-life. What is more, a footnote to Hegel's *Ästhetik* describes how this *relève* is required for the spirit to prevail (*walten*), thus suturing *puissance* to metaphor. For it is against such an arch-originary force of metaphoricity that power and life shatters itself, shipwrecking such binaries and ruining in advance both teleological idealization and materialist reduction.

The *épuisement* that Derrida discerns in Cixous's writing, unlike the traditional conception of metaphor as *usure* that he challenges in 'La mythologies blanche', exceeds anything that philosophy might master or dominate or of which a subject might be capable, even the monstrosity that

is domesticated and appropriated the moment in its named as such. Cixous's *puisse* swerves us, pushing even at the envelope of *la vie la mort*, this passage seems to suggest, towards life as something irrecuperable, irreducibly mourned in advance, borne only by the force of a prosthetic metaphoricity than not only precedes me and inanimates me in David Wills' idiom but also has the character of the 'afterburn' of the untranslatable idiom that in the rekindling eyes or ears of the other-as-witness 'will leap up again like a flame' (Kamuf 2006, 53).

I want, in conclusion, to vie between this flame that burns on after the burning up of translation, of the sun, of the world, after their *épuisement*, and another sense of the sun's untimely exhaustion. According to 'La mythologie blanche' everything under the sun is affected by metaphor, and the sun, as a metaphor for life-giving, is the master metaphor; all metaphor is at bottom heliotropic. So when in *H. C. pour la vie* Derrida speaks of life's *puissance* in the figure of a sun always already extinguished or at least prostheticized as life-for-life, we get the other side—with all the necessary precautions that there is no other side—of *physis* as *poussance*. The iterability of metaphorization renders the purported propriety of meaning 'nocturnal', the sun extinguished in advance along with its humanist conceptions of language. This is not the death of metaphor *as opposed to life* but another death of metaphor, its demetaphorization or *épuisement* by other metaphors, one metaphor *for* another. *Walten* is thus in the language of 'La mythologie blanche' a catachrestic force. Power is accordingly less the unfathomable inky reservoir at the bottom of the well waiting to surge up or be drawn than the twinkling *éclats* of the night sky.

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