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Cry

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At first blush, the relation between the cry and literature in Cixous's work seems to pull in two different directions. On the one hand, the cry is so intimately associated with literature and with what distinguishes it from other forms of discourse, such as philosophy, that it almost seems to be defining, even constitutive, of the literary. In the 2013 text *Ayai! Le cri de la littérature*, the "right to literature" is described interchangeably as "the right to cries that reality or the community forbid us [*le droit aux cris que la réalité et la communauté nous interdisent*]."¹ After a series of variations spanning from a greeting ("ALLO!") to a shriek ("Ai!"), Cixous lets out a cry about the cry, exclaiming in a threefold ejaculation that writing is the taking back of a cry that has been "torn from me." Writing just is the translation into its "ultrasilence" of "the sharp and short cries of reality [*les cris aigus et brefs de la réalité*]"—the cries that reality at the same time denies. Literature might just be the persistence, the survival, the return of the cry that patriarchy, along with metaphysics in general, represses. This might be its driving *raison d'être*: "Literature is for yelling at length," enthuses Cixous, "pushing cries all the way to music." It will be necessary to return later to the way in which literature transforms the cry, makes it melodic or rhythmic, renders it musical, in its simultaneous retreat from and salvage of reality, and thereby makes sound what reality silences, if only on condition that it sound otherwise, musically—*cri* now retuned as *é-cri-ture*. First, however, let us turn to this generalizing, almost universalizing impulse of the *cri* as the heart of *é-cri-ture*, as what makes literature distinctive, against a claim for uniqueness.

On the other hand, the cry in literature is a one-off event. A few years before *Ayai!* came out (for that is perhaps the only idiom to describe publishing a cry), Cixous had agreed to the republication of two texts that in the eyes of her global readership, though not in her own, had come to define her thought and her contribution: "Le rire de la Méduse," which had been published in 1975 in French in an issue of *L'Arc* devoted to Simone de Beauvoir, and "Sorties," which formed a section of *La Jeune née*, jointly written with Catherine Clément and published in the same year.² Neither had been sounded again in French since. In her introduction to the new 2010 edition, Cixous laments that a certain musical note or resonance had been silenced in the texts' reception insofar as they were received as an *appel*, heard as a manifesto, a cry turned into a rallying cry.³ The course of this mishearing will nonetheless open onto a certain

rapprochement between the poetic and the political, or their mutual promise, that I seek to tease out at the end of this entry. At this juncture, however, Cixous is keen to stress the idiomaticity, the untranslatability of literature's cry, or, to be precise, not the concept of "cry" that literature might produce, the cry of literature, objective genitive, but the cry that one makes in literature or that literatures makes as a one-off event, an unrepeatable, unpredictable moment with nothing of the generalizability of a concept or even (thinking more in the realm of politics) a tactic of writing.

I cried out [*J'ai crié*].

One cries out once [*On crie une fois*].

I had already written a lot [in 1975]. Texts that were free, beyond, audacious, dateless [*sans date*]. It still happens that I cry out, but not in literature [*Il m'arrive encore de crier, mais pas en littérature*]. One cries out only once in literature [*On ne crie qu'une fois en littérature*]. I cried out [*J'ai crié*]. Come on. One good time [*Une bonne fois*]. I reset the clocks [*J'ai fait date*]. One time. Did I calculate it? No. It was time. An emergency. A dislocation. The cry that gushes forth at the articulation of times [*Un cri qui jaillit à l'articulation des temps*]. One must cry it out in writing [*Il faut le crier par écrit*]. Print the laughter [*Imprimer le rire*].⁴

How, then, to reconcile the fact that her cries—that she dates with the *passé composé* to a moment in the past, to 1975—are dateless, free to be transmitted, translated, taken up and taken back and, at the same time—the same one, good time—happen only once? The cry stands for both the unique unrepeatable event of the idiom *and* the very generalizing dissemination, each of which defines literature. In *Ayai!* Cixous highlights the transmissibility of the cry: "Cries travel [*les cris voyagent*]," she quips ("Ay," 210/58). Recalling the cry of Ajax, who himself has been forgotten and diminished over the 3,000 years since, she argues that, unlike the man, his cries of pain have survived, "heard and reignited by Samson Agonistes, by Dostoevsky, by Proust." The method of transmission is telepathy. Ajax's suffering, she suggests, "makes its way to me by the electric force of writing-that-keeps, by all-powerful literature [*la toute-puissante littérature*] our mother memory-forgetting, and transmits the music of the cry by architelephony" ("Ay," 211/59). Ajax's cries have reached Derrida's ears too, she notes, and without his having reread Sophocles. In *États d'âme de la psychanalyse* they are said to have "screamed in him all night long, by means of some secret telepathy" ("Ay," 211/59).

Between these two cries, then, is neither discord nor straight homonymy. Rather, there is a kind of monotony that Derrida describes as syntactic.⁵ The cry re-marks itself. The series of singular cries echoing over history is held together by a force of transmissibility—one might even say a force of audibility—for which the cry is also a name. The cry is an example not simply of what it names but of what it *does*, a shattering force that disseminates its pain over the centuries to myriad ears. What is unrepeatable in the cry is this very repeatability or iterability. What the cry sounds and what is typically misheard as an inarticulate noise outside of the *logos*—something that falls to literature to express because it goes unheard by the philosophical ear—is

nothing other than this transmissibility. This is why the reception of *Le Rire* angers Cixous: It has silenced the laugh in the writing, the *éc-rire*, as she puts it in the 2010 introduction (*RM*, 26). In turning the text into feminist theory or manifesto, it does the exact opposite of what she sought to do in her writing. It puts a hand over the mouth of her “glorious outburst” of laughter, whose excesses and multiplicities it had not sought to hide or to stifle but in which Cixous, had on the contrary, revelled, “up to her ears” into the pluralization of tongues and voices (*RM*, 27).

As Peggy Kamuf explains, *Le Rire* was performative; if it was a manifesto for anything, it was for what this pluralizing, disseminating, amphibolous, polysemous writing *does*. By shoehorning this dissemination into a philosophy or political platform, the reception has failed to hear this laugh-cry, turning it into a “Rilkean cry [un *cri rilkéen*]” (*RM*, 28) that despairs of being heard even among the angels. More than that, it despairs that no one hears it as a response to its own call. As *éc-rire* shifts its tonal emphasis to *é-cri-ture*, this response marks something like the simultaneous impossibility of transmission, of being heard, transforming laughter’s expulsion of air from the mouth into a sigh. She laments: “I think that I thought that I would be heard” (*RM*, 28). It is this mark of at once being possible and impossible that seems to transform the laugh into the cry.

The cry is, then, constitutively *destinerrant*: it does not necessarily arrive at the destination for which it is destined. In fact, for Derrida, one might say that it is necessarily possible that it not arrive. What is untranslatable is this (im)possibility of transmission. Hence the untranslatable idiom, which in deconstruction sometimes appears to be a singularity that resists generalization, as if it were a substrate left over from the work of conceptualization, is perhaps better understood as the re-marking of this (im)possible telephonic-telepathic transmissibility and substitutability. That is what cannot be said except as a cry.

This is one reason why—from *Le Rire* to a text prepared over thirty years later for a conference at Berkeley in 2006 on “Derrida and the Time of the Political,” which was developed further for an event in Paris in 2008 on a similar theme—Cixous has associated the cry with plurivocality and polyphony. She cites a conversation she had with Derrida in May 2004 about sexual difference and the politics of plurivocality. He argues that monologism is impossible: “I would not be able to pull it off . . . I had to change voices . . . I had to make several persons speak.”⁶ For both Derrida and Cixous, rather than a single voice as authorial origin, what is essential comes from another voice, including another voice in me, which is the same and not the same. Therein lies the analogy with sexual difference. Even before the voices are sexualized, there is for Derrida a difference of voices “set on the page, responding to each without responding to each other.”⁷ In this way, there is a displacement not only of the origin into a voice that is always already a response but, moreover, a displacement of this response. The voice is not in the possession of a sovereign subject who can say “I can,” “I can respond,” “I can cry.” The cry names the very life of writing that happens to us as a form of prosthetic substitutability or “an art of replacement,” as the title of Cixous’s doctoral dissertation has it.⁸

Cixous, though, offers a distinctive twist on the Derridean analysis when she suggests towards the end of *Ayai!* that, if the letter does not arrive, this “*destinerrance*”

might in fact derive less from the waywardness of the address and more from the flight of the addressee.

Death's letter has departed. It is searching for its addressee. And my life is a flight, too long according to some, not long enough for others, in the face of the letter. While fleeing I have just the time to write *The Verdict. Das Urteil*. The whole time I am running before the letter, before the Law, I contest the address—is it me?, I don't recognize myself with that homonymic name, get lost!, and during the entire time of *my* destinerance, because it is I who misleads the message and not the message that gets lost . . . why send a messenger to ask if my monotonous cry [*cri monotone*] is really addressed to you? You very well know that *each time* I toll, at each unique end, as you would say, it is you who are struck, each knell celebrates you, you die in each death. ("Ay," 206/44–5)

In *H. C. pour la vie*, Derrida analyzes how the Cixousian predilection for homonymic substitution that pluralizes writing and makes it a cry, is intertwined with a certain magical, telegraphic or mighty power—the *Toute-Puissance autre* of literature ("Ay," 200/23)—that makes or lets the letter arrive, or more precisely abolishes the difference between letting and making arrive.⁹ More is said in the entry in this volume on "puisse" about the subtle tensions between Derrida's and Cixous's conceptions of power and (im)possibility, but for present purposes it suffices to note that the cry, for Cixous, takes the form of a jussive subjunctive: I cry out, "Would that it might arrive!" This brings us to a central theme in her writing with which the cry and its destinerance are closely associated: life and death. The cry conjures up both the arrival of life, the sound of the infant, and grief's protest against death, its wailing and lamentation. On this point, too, Cixous will depart in subtle yet decisive ways from the Derridean notion of life-death (*la vie la mort*) whereby, according to a logic of autoimmunity, all life is always already contaminated by death because life without the risk of death would not be life in any meaningful sense and life made absolute, safe from death, would have extinguished itself *as life*.

In a striking passage near the start of *Ayâi!*, Cixous characterizes literature as a cry not simply of suffering but *against* death.

Néant, nothingness, *née en*, born in, dead in, *néant*, nothingness! *Néant!* In French what a fabulous word, a volley of words fell on the flowerbeds and the mimosas, everything was cries and music, I cried out: Live on! I cried: Papa! Papa! When a life is taken from us, you will have noticed, we cry out the name of the cherished being, we conjure it, we repeat it, in place of all language's words we name and call, we endlessly ring out: Grandma! Papa!, we stab the void with the unique name, we stitch it back, we multiply it infinitely to change the nothingness into music, we hammer the anvil of silence with our chanted names: Eurydice! Mama!, we cry out for the being who does not respond, we shout in her place: calling chases away the silence, contradicts death's sentence. We call the being who is not here, we hold her back by the fringes of her being, by the letters of her name, we pray we cry Dieu!

We cryate God! Dieu, Nothingness. And the prayer answers itself. The cryayer [*la crière*]. The invention of literature, like . . . the invention of writing, is an urgent defense against pillaging, massacre, forgetting. . . You are dead. I snatch the world from you. I take your breath away. It's over. Done for. Finished. Says mortality.—No! I cry. (“Ay,” 200–201/25)

Here and elsewhere Cixous characterizes literature and its cries as telephonic, as the line that connects the living to the (recently) departed, that magically calls them back to life. Cixous does not simply theorize this kind of literary survival or resurrection. Her writing performs it. In “Le manuscrit volant” in *Insister*, for example, she writes, with an abundance of homonymic play, of Derrida crying out, “toward *Vers*, in verse [*en vers*] . . . vermiformally, like a worm [*comme un ver*], inaudible cry, the silky cry of a self [*cri de soie*], knowing, like any reader of Rilke, from the first Duino elegy, that there is perhaps no angel who would hear him.”¹⁰ It is fortunate, she concludes, that no one heard it since he would not have wanted them to worry at his cry of anguish. Nonetheless, “he sends me this cry enveloped in some paper, from Buenos Aires advising me not to receive it before it/he has been extinguished, the cry. I read it therefore only extinguished. Cryore.” [*Il crie, et il m'envoie ce cri enveloppé dans du papier, depuis Buenos Aires en me recommandant de ne pas le recevoir avant qu'il se soit éteint, le cri. Je ne l'ai donc lu qu'éteint. Crier.*] (*IN*, 101/74).

As Kamuf notes, French permits this ambiguity: it may be the cry or Derrida dying (out).¹¹ Immediately afterwards, though, “a cry starts up again like a flame” (*IN*, 102/74). Cixous finally comes to read it and “listen to it absolutely, this cry-sigh, kept vibrant, and perfectly audible” (*IN*, 102/74). This survival made possible by the cry—by its outliving, overtaking, outspeeding death in its punctuations—comes only with its transmutation into something more than a sonorous object that can heat up and burn (out). If the animal quality of this animating power of literature,¹² encapsulated in the cry, is a recurring motif in Cixous's writing, this is less because the cry is somehow before or outside of articulate language than because animality, like the heating up of the cry, introduces a certain volatility into writing by deconstructing the logic of those metaphysical categories that oppose human and animal, man and woman, culture and nature, *logos* and noise—the list of binaries that Cixous presents at the start of “Sorties.” What she calls “telefauny” is an echo, though not without diffraction through the medium of her *écriture féminine*, of what Derrida calls the “animality of the letter.”¹³

In Derrida, this animality is another way of referring to the trace structure, to the differential movement that gives *écriture, la vie la mort*, and his other non-synonymous substitutions both this iterability and an autoimmune character on account of which they always hold themselves back from becoming infinite and thereby destroy themselves. In other words, animality is a strategy of survival or self-preservation. In her reading of *Béliers* in “Ça promet,” Cixous explicitly draws out a double sense of the animal in deconstruction by way of the cry—sounded in these texts by the horn [*corne*] of the ram whose spirals, twists, and torsions are braided, for her, with sexual difference (*IN*, 149/99), by the shofar that announces, now in Derrida's words, the edge “between life and death, as if between rebirth and the end, between the world and the end of

the world, that is, between the world and the mournful annihilation of the other or of himself.¹⁴ Noting that the animals into whose voices he slips are threatened species, she observes that writing is for him, “an *animal ruse*, a *protective ruse* [*une ruse animale, une ruse protectrice*]” (“CP,” 160) that relies on its “protean,” “chameleon” character. It is both (with Abraham and Issac) a sa-cri-fice and (with Ulysses) a protective shield (“CP,” 161). Playing on the highly polysemous phrase “donner le change,” used by Derrida in *Donner le temps* to conjure up the multiple senses of monetary exchange, sidetracking, subterfuge, and, specific to hunting, the escape of a chased animal: “Writing to protect himself, to switch himself out. [*Écrire pour se protéger, pour donner le change.*]” (“CP,” 160). The cry, then, is not an unconditional hospitality to the other but a conditional mix of abandoning oneself to the other and curling up into a prickly ball, retreating into a shell, or changing color so as to go unseen.

Cixous therefore rejects the idea that writing has nothing to do with politics (“CP,” 157), insisting that deconstruction is simultaneously devoted to poetic *and* political experimentation (“CP,” 149). What gives literature as cry its political promise is, however, not the positions it adopts, not the declarations or demands it makes, not even the theories it expounds. Recalling the tautology of her jussive that collapses making and letting arrive, literature cries out under the force of its cry. It becomes worthy of the epithet *political* precisely because of what she calls “the singing movement of deconstruction [*mouvement chantant de la déconstruction*]” (“CP,” 157), by the ways in which the letter turns back on itself, retraces itself, by its reinscriptions and metamorphoses, by its animal avatars and its intricate weave—in short, by the very transmissibility that is at stake in the cry but which failed to find a hearing. This animal trace is what heats up so as to destabilize the metaphysical oppositions of patriarchy, imperialism, humanism, and of the proper in general which distributes rights, empire, and place in the world according to a hierarchy. In *Ayai!* Cixous suggests that the cry speaks to the anger of wounded animals, which literature “sings” and transforms into “hymn, rhythms, sentences” (“Ay,” 205/41–42). Literature, then, is the musicalization of rage against injustice. It preserves and protects the life of a force “stronger than we are” by turning nothingness into music (“Ay,” 201/25).