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“LITTLE MESSIAH: RELATIONAL RELIGION IN HÉLÈNE CIXOUS’S MESSIE”

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ABSTRACT

This thesis performs a close textual analysis of Cixous's text *Messie*, paying particular attention to the text's central relationship between the human protagonist and her cat. Considering the complex dynamics of this relationship, this project attempts to understand the significant ways Cixous's narrative outlines a religious and ethical relationality between humans and animals. Ultimately, inspired by *Messie's* ethics, this thesis posits an ethics of relation readers may themselves apply to animal relations.

LITTLE MESSIAH: RELATIONAL RELIGION IN HÉLÈNE CIXOUS'S *MESSIE*

by

Rachel Carpenter

B.A., Indiana University Bloomington, 2016

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts in Religion.

Syracuse University

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It was strange although obvious to discover so late on that God had given mortals the different species of cat including horses and dogs for masters. The first lesson was: have a cat for an intellectual guide, put yourself to thinking a cat to be thought, a creature that doesn't even have any words with which to speak to us.

Get on four paws to pray.

-Hélène Cixous, *Messie*¹

*For Sigil, Olive, and Kae:
my three favorite cats*

¹ Hélène Cixous, "The Cat's Arrival," *Parallax* (vol. 12, no. 1, 2006), 23.

In the original French: Arrivée du chat p. 58 « Ce qui était bizarre c'est qu'il était bien tard pour découvrir que Dieu avait donné pour maitres aux mortels les chats des différentes espèces, y compris les chevaux et les chiens. Pourtant c'est évident. Et la première leçon : avoir pour penser, une créature qui n'a même pas la parole pour nous parler. Se mettre à quatre pattes pour prier. »

The Advent of a Cat:

In her 1996 book *Messie*, Hélène Cixous writes, “The supernatural comes and goes. You don’t hear her arrive, a sudden presence, silent and scented: a slip of gilded lightning now steadies itself on a shelf in the sitting-room. As troubling as a reappearance. Such a power of being does not date from yesterday. It dates from tomorrow.”² Her “slip of gilded lightning” is, of course, a cat. Lithe and picaresque, darting within and without the frame of her focus.

Cixous wrote this passage, like many of her passages in many of her books, in a blended portrait of fiction and autobiography. She wrote it whilst holding her own cat in mind. For my part, I hold this writing, cohered in the form of a book, within my hands. Always in the corner of my mind—and often in the periphery of my sightline, perched upon the desk or curled, sleeping upon the bed—sits, lays, pounces, and frolics my own, very real cat. I feel her “sudden presence” and I note her “power of being.”³ In these ways, and so many more beyond, Cixous’s writing reaches out, off the pages of the book and into my life to inevitably, thankfully, inflect my approach to this writing project. I write now, following behind Cixous, trailing behind my cat, her cat, and our curious, lively relations. I pause every now and again, glance over to my bed, and see there, laying quietly, that little being that may just be a little god.

² Cixous, “The Cat’s Arrival,” 24.

In original French: Arrivée du chat p. 60 « Le surnaturel entre et sort, on ne l’entend pas arriver, soudain c’est une telle présence silencieuse et parfumée : un bout de foudre dorée s’est posé sur l’étagère dans le salon. Aussi troublante qu’une réapparition. Ça ne date pas d’hier une telle puissance d’être. Ça date de demain. »

³ Ibid., 24.

And so I pounce upon *Messie*. Attempting to understand the implications and opportunities drawn out in the curious relationship between woman and cat, I squint at the words on the pages. Inside I find so many divine shapes and ethical networks in the play of godhood, cathood, and the acute task of caring for the other.

By considering the nexus of relationality, most specifically concentrated in moments of physical interaction between the woman and her cat, I note the relevance of Cixous's work within the larger frames of animal studies and anti-humanist discourses. *Messie* offers a model for ethically relating to animals and, ultimately, to any other being through its application of religious language, touch, and intimacy.

At its core, this project, this endeavor, is an exercise in close reading. It is also an exercise in attending to the largely unattended work of fictionalized life that is *Messie*. While other thinkers have glanced at *Messie*, the scholarship that looks directly at the text for itself is all but nonexistent. I want to open this book. I want to dust off its pages and feel the shape of its inky words. To listen to the overtones of ethics, chart the geometries of character relations. Pulling at the threads of ideas, the knots of words woven inside, I seek to illustrate the myriad of ways that *Messie*'s animal and human relations outline an ethics of hospitality, care, and acceptance that values difference—as something to embrace, not something to overcome.⁴

I do not travel alone in this close reading. I bring with me, as thinking companions and mentors of theory, the texts of French philosophers Jacques Derrida and

⁴ As I will discuss at more length later on in this project, I do not intend for this ethics to be a normative imperative. Due to the specificity and intimacy of Thea and the woman's relationship, the model of ethical relationality that Cixous outlines resists normative patterning.

Jean-Luc Nancy. Both Derrida and Nancy's works run closely beside Cixous's. They offer expansive perspectives on terms, ideas, and concepts, as well as providing important voices for thinking through the questions of animal difference and touch. I listen to Matthew Calarco's explanation of difference and Erin Manning's affect-laden understanding of touch. Guided by their research and their questions, I peer closely at the text, squinting at the ink for stray hairs and dashes of divine animal light.

Messie is a difficult book to describe. It twists out of your grasp, just as you begin to wrap a summary around it. One could describe *Messie* as the story of a woman whose life changes upon meeting a cat named Thea. Or perhaps one might say *Messie* is a navigation of the relationship between cat and woman—or, as the book sometimes curiously constructs it: cat-cat and woman-cat. But maybe the best way to describe Cixous's book is as a contemplation of the transformative and affective complexities of loving another—another that is an Other.⁵ All of these descriptions would be adequate—more informative than not, perhaps. But they also fail to get to the heart of the book itself, to fully attend to its many contours.

This is partly because *Messie*'s very construction refuses easy description. *Messie*'s writing communicates on two levels: the literal and the metaphoric. The book insists upon this two-fold style wherein words demand to be read as poetic exaggeration *and* serious truth. I follow this structural framework in my own readings by refusing to

⁵ Throughout this project, I appeal to affect theory. I lightly apply it as a useful frame for understanding the ways Thea's presence impacts the woman at the nexus of rationality, imagination, poetry, phenomenology, and emotion. Erin Manning's particular model of affect attends to the importance of movement and touch, adding phenomenological consideration to Brian Massumi's theoretical framework.

choose one level or the other, by close reading the text through literal *and* metaphorical lenses. To this end, I focus less on *Messie*'s overarching narrative, favoring instead certain syntactic particulars embedded within the text.

Messie reads like an extended thought process, voicing the opinions, observations, and ideas of the narrator, a woman who is an approximation of Cixous herself. *Messie* is shaped by the relationships it reveals: through its narrative or themes and through its very form of writing. Cixous embeds the text with the affective experience of encountering otherness, coloring the voice with tones of bewilderment, curiosity, astonishment. As Marta Segarra puts it, Cixous “never defines the notion of alterity,” favoring instead “to *perform* it through her writing.”⁶ This performance, this writing, invites the reader to more deeply engage with the task of relating to another because of, in spite of, within, through, and for their alterity. Through this performance, we feel and see how the fictionalized Cixous has her life interrupted, upended, and reshaped by Thea.

Two sections in particular feature the evolution of their relationship, and it is on these sections that this project lingers. In the first, “The Cat’s Arrival,” woman and cat perform a back-and-forth dance as the woman initially resists Thea’s intrusion, only to eventually fall in love with the cat.⁷ The woman refuses the cat again and again,

⁶ Marta Segarra, “Love (and) the Other,” *The Portable Cixous Reader*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 99.

Importantly, as Segarra stresses, Cixous’s refusal to define “alterity” stems from a resistance to rationalize the other. That is, to filter them through her own perspective and interpret their actions through human logics. Undefined words like alterity—words that describe or communicate something *else*, something *other*, something affectively striking but ultimately ineffable—are common within Cixous’s writing, and often instigate appeals to religious language.

⁷ The original French title of this section is “Arrivée du chat.” I use the *Parallax* translation of this section. (See: Hélène Cixous, “The Cat’s Arrival,” *Parallax* (vol. 12, no. 1, 2006)). Throughout the course of this paper, I will simply cite this section as “The Cat’s Arrival.”

enforcing boundaries to hold them apart until one night when the woman forgets to lock her bedroom door, and the cat sneaks in. Curled up together, they fall in love. The woman realizes she cannot but love a creature that gives of itself so freely. Her family and friends misunderstand her attachment to Thea, but the woman ignores them. She chooses Thea. She sides with the cat against the human world. In the second section “Imitations of Thea,” the woman wonders at her new relation, perplexed by the strange creature whose way of living is so very different from her own.⁸ As she contemplates their connection, the woman considers the ways in which she, too, is a kind of cat: a woman-cat, set strongly in resistance to human rationality and academic structures. But this cathood is specific to her relationship with Thea. Outside their insular relation, she is a woman—beset by classroom obligations and requests for lectures. She remains in the human world, in a human body with human obligations. When confronted with the (human, rational) question, “What is Poetry?,” the woman can only think about her relationship with Thea and the overwhelming importance of touch as their own abbreviated form of communication.⁹ She refuses to define poetry in human terms. She concludes: if anything, poetry must be touching—hands touching—as a condensed form of expressing love and willing the other to keep living.

For Cixous’s narrator, the cat that enters her life figures as a supernatural force—not through any super-cat or un-catlike behavior, but precisely through and for her catness. Her quiet feet allowing her silent passage through the house—only to burst forth

⁸ The original French title of this section is “Imitations du Thea.” In *Messie*, “Imitations of Thea” follows “The Cat’s Arrival.” I use Marta Segarra’s translation of this section (See: Marta Segarra, “Imitations of Thea,” *The Portable Cixous Reader*). Throughout the course of this paper, I will simply cite this translation as “Imitations of Thea.”

⁹ “Imitations of Thea,” 172.

within another room, onto a table or leaping from chair to chair: she is at once a revelation and a blessing. Her past movements unnoticed, her future unknown, the only way to divine Thea is in the briefest glimpse of the now as she “now steadies [herself] on a shelf in the sitting-room.”¹⁰ These fleeting, barely graspable moments highlight the astounding differences between cat who darts forward for life and woman stumbling, ever attempting to keep track of her.¹¹ It is this difference, in many ways, which makes room for mystical or religious language—seen in the passage above as “supernatural,” and elsewhere in *Messie* as “grace” or “divinity.”¹²

Religion scurries throughout Cixous’s writing, never appearing as the expected or familiar institution of church, temple, or book. Religious language, or language saturated with religious valuation and meaning, often comes into play within Cixous’s works in moments of relational difference. Far from following the script of prescribed institutional religion, Cixous’s works push against, write without, or invent new models of religion and religious experience.

Within *Messie* and several of her later works, religion inflects the relationships of character that populate her worlds. Whomever the Other may be within the work, the surprising and wondrous difference between them and the narrator results in their divinization. Cixous’s *The Book of Promethea* exemplifies this as the protagonist addresses her lover in religious prose: “I bless you, Promethea, you who want to be

¹⁰ “The Cat’s Arrival,” 21.

¹¹ In *H.C. For Life, That is to Say*, Derrida posits that Cixous writes “for life” in a way that harmoniously counters his own work “for death.” While Cixous disagrees with this assessment, her characterization here illustrates the same tension Derrida portrays in his book: Thea ever-urges forward, wanting to burst into the world, while the woman restrains her because she, unlike Thea, knows death. And she knows Thea’s eventual death is inevitable. Unlike Derrida, death figures as a human preoccupation for Cixous. The woman’s fear of death pushes her to interfere with Thea’s vibrant appetite for life.

¹² “The Cat’s Arrival,” 23; “Imitations of Thea” p.165-167

deserving, you who believe you have to fight for the love of love. What different fervent roads did you take to escape the Christian epics you never read?”¹³ “I bless you” here functions as relational language, articulating the mixture of awe, affection, and perhaps bewilderment the protagonist feels toward *Promethea*. The phrase sits ambivalently, fully bearing the religious weight of “bless” without carrying its implications. In other words, “bless” matters here without assuming that the narrator is ordained with the power to bless and without simplifying the “I bless you” to a colloquial metaphor, such as might be said in response to a sneeze. As in *Promethea*, instances of affection, surprise, connection, and passion within *Messie* are written in religious colors, painting the relational scenes as supplications, divine experiences, and devotional entanglements.

The tension of Cixous’s religious language—that both is and is not metaphorical, literary, but also is and is not literal, lived—will not be resolved during the course of this project. I hold onto this tension. I cradle it, listen to its hum. I keep this tension because it is equally important to attend to the literal and metaphoric valences within Cixous’s religious language. Sorting out their tangled quandary into rational explanations *or* spiritual divinations, poetic flourish *or* mystical interpretation, would be a disservice to the work. The irreducible and irresolvable bramble of *Messie*’s language remains complex and rich with questions: how might we consider seriously a form of religion that exists in such tension? How might we see the little Thea as god, cat, animal, and entity in such a way that attends to the religious as much as it attends to the secular?

¹³ Hélène Cixous, *The Book of Promethea*, Trans. by Betsy Wing, (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 201.

In the original French: Le livre de Promethea p. 237 « Je te bénis, Promethea, toi qui veux mériter, toi qui crois devoir lutter pour l’amour de l’amour. Echappée de épopées chrétiennes que tu n’as jamais lues, par quelles routes de ferveurs différentes es-tu passée[...] »

Alongside religion, animals play a prominent role in Cixous's writing, cantering through most of her works. Cats race across pages; horses gallop over the margins. Dogs, wolves, ostriches, donkeys, birds—even hedgehogs enter the spotlight. The animals in Cixous's menagerie are irreducibly animal. That is to say, they are neither allegorical nor simply literary constructions. Cixous draws upon animals from her life and experiences, replaying their actions and musing on their characteristics. They crawl and scamper between the page and Cixous's own past, blending and playing upon the poetic creation of fiction and the ghostly remnants of autobiography. Within her works, these real animals significantly figure into the text as dynamic characters with as much will and desire as any human. The animals exceed human comprehension, always seeming just beyond reach. Cixous's human characters might aptly name an animal, but their assumptions and interpretations of that animal's behavior are only ever guesswork.

Studying the animals of Cixous's world is never a singular endeavor. Attention to one member of her menagerie ripples out, acting as a synecdoche of the larger collective of animals. This rippling allows us to understand her feelings toward and treatment of animals throughout her oeuvre. Cixous's portrayal of Thea is the microcosmic model for her interactions with the other animals in her works. Through these interactions, she demonstrates her own fundamental ethics of relation to animal beings. In following Cixous, following Thea, I track these patterns and trace the ethical map of relations outlined in her works more broadly.

Cixous characterizes her animals as complex and always somewhat inaccessible to human understanding. This makes her works particularly useful for thinking through

anti-humanist discourses on animals.¹⁴ The meeting of dynamic animals and religious relational language in *Messie* also invites a close consideration of ethics within the context of religion studies. The protagonist's repeated assertions that both her cat Thea is divine and that the experience of relating to her is salvific provides the opportunity to think deeply about the ethical effects of religious language as a medium for relating to animals.¹⁵ These details—the language, the animals, the relations—are the touchstones of this project.

In order to best navigate the avenues of *Messie*, I focus my textual analysis on instances of touch. Touching is never simple and never simply an action in *Messie*. An absent touch of Thea—grazing her fur, scratching her ears—ushers in a shifting wind of altered identity and internal healing. It is because she “[touches] the sweet, ferocious touch of Thea” that she recognizes her as “the cat whose cat I am”—a declaration of herself as beholden to Thea but also as “cat” herself.¹⁶ Touch changes things for these characters. It instantiates change. It instantiates, too, a kind of connection and relationality that reaches across the boundaries of difference and ethics—a touch across not as similarity but as responsibility, care, and companionship.

¹⁴ As outlined in Matthew Calarco's work *Thinking Through Animals*, anti-humanist theorists of difference argue that we should pay more attention to the ways that animals are different from humans—not as a means to outline their inferiority but to appreciate their individuality. Through recognition of mutual individuality and difference, we can stop attempting to filter all life through human lenses and value others on their own terms. I will return to this point more at a later point within my project. (See: Matthew Calarco, *Thinking Through Animals*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Cixous's use of loaded terms such as “salvation,” “soul,” “sacred,” and “grace” is ambivalent. She places a lot of emphasis on the veracity of these words without situating them in a definitive tradition. She neither yokes them to a familiar religious heritage nor relegates them to poetic gestures.

¹⁶ “Imitations of Thea,” 166.

In the original French: Imitations du Théa p.105 « C'est avec émotion et nostalgie que je touche au doux et farouche toucher de Thea la chatte dont je suis la chatte. »

I return to this quote later on in my project to discussion its relational dynamics in greater detail.

Little Ball of Fur with a Goddess Inside

Nestled in the heart of *Messie*, purrs, pounces, and mews Thea—a cat whose tricoloration and unassuming stare so utterly grip Cixous’s autobiographical narrator that, to the woman, Thea becomes a god. Her presence changes the woman. Her touch heals the woman’s soul. Through her animal difference and divine affect, Thea remains an enigmatic puzzle to the woman. Over and again, Thea slips out of the narrator’s grasp, evading her attempts to comprehend and communicate with the cat.

Thea initially enters the book by way of her fur. Introduced by her “tricolore” appearance—black like the night, white like milk, and orange like the setting summer sun¹⁷—Thea is identifiably a calico. Her breed indicates much more than pedigree: calicos are predominantly female and the tripartite coloring points to, for Cixous, a kind of material makeup of Thea. She is a cat made up of thirds: a third night, a third day, and a third light. To call these thirds simply metaphorical does not do them justice—not quite, at any rate. Thea’s coloring invites a kind of character analysis in miniature: she is not one thing but many; like the Christian God, Thea is a trinity and a unity; Thea’s thirds represent different characteristics of being and living within the world. Evenso, running in a contradictory parallel with these interpretive valences, Thea is a cat. Thea is simply black, white, and orange. She is simply a calico. Any attempts to read meaning into her coloration is a human fiction—a vain attempt at learning the cat and knowing her being through her phenotype.

¹⁷ Cixous, *Messie*, (Paris, Des Femmes, 1996), 11.

In the original French: « Ce chat était une petite chatte tricolore, noire comme la nuit blanche comme le lait, orange comme le soleil d’été aux crépuscules. »

As a cat, Thea is somewhat inaccessible. She thinks, breathes, lives, and understands the world with an entirely different code than the human narrator. Her intentions are unclear. Her desires, though often articulated, are untethered to rational discourse. As a cat, she is a foreigner. A divine stranger. The divinity of Thea's strangeness is key to Cixous. Sometimes otherness "attracts us," says Cixous.¹⁸ Sometimes we understand the foreignness of the other as "exhaling, wonderful, and in the end of the same species as God."¹⁹ "Of the same species as God" invites further unpacking: Cixous connects divinity with alterity, arguing that foreignness in the Other can be more than positive. It can be godly. Thea's difference makes her divine, makes her the same species as God.²⁰

Messie does this: redirecting difference from something foreign and *therefore* dangerous to something foreign and *therefore* divine. The book revalues qualities of the strange, the unexpected, and the unknown. Instead of seeing Thea's animal otherness as an attack or abomination, the woman connects that otherness with salvation, grace, and the sublime.²¹ Thea is "the same species as God."²² In this way, *Messie* enacts another of Cixous's philosophies: that a true appreciation for the other involves "Loving, not knowing. Loving: not knowing"—appreciation through *not* understanding, through the concession *not* to know.²³ The sentiment is direct, concise. It contains, first, a correction: do not mistake the act of knowing something for the experience of loving it. Second, a

¹⁸ Cixous, *Rootprints*, (London, Routledge, 1997), 1.

¹⁹ Cixous, *Rootprints*, 17.

²⁰ Indeed, Thea's name is a feminized version of "Theo," or "god."

²¹ "Imitations of Thea," 165-167

²² Cixous, *Rootprints*, 17.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

definition: Loving is not-knowing. And sometimes, not knowing can be lived, experienced, felt not as dangerous inadequacy but divine incomprehensibility.

But how literal is this “God” to which Thea is kin? Perhaps unsatisfactorily, “God” here is as literal as it is metaphorical. The “same species” here could represent similitude—a congruency in appearance but ultimately, ontologically, different. On the other hand, this “same species” might establish ties of kinship between the other, Thea, and God. Cixous holds both interpretations close, and, as such, sustains an ambiguous relationship to religion throughout *Messie* and her other works.

This complicated and sometimes clashing double reading of the text as both metaphoric and literal is key to understanding and appreciating the narrator’s rich presentation of Thea. The affective description of the narrator’s response to Thea often verges on the poetic in a way that both communicates accurate experience and reveals itself to be in excess of language. There is a shortage of words to describe the sensation of responsibility and attachment for the woman: a shortage yielding abundance, spilling over the edges of things. For the woman, petting Thea is “perfection” as she is “caressed caressed from my hand right to the tip of my soul the stroking spreads out warm soft small gathered seamlessly into the yoke of an impersonal goodness.”²⁴ She experiences contact and intimacy as more than physical interaction: it reaches her soul. This experience cannot be understood only as metaphoric. It is *felt* as real. It is insisted upon. And yet, the invocation of “soul” in this passage as well as other religiously-inflected

²⁴ “Imitations of Thea,” 166.

In the original French: Imitations du Thea p. 105 « C’est une perfection, j’en suis toute caressée depuis ma main jusqu’à mon âme la caresse se répand chaude douce petite parfaitement rassemblée sous la forme de la bonté impersonnelle. »

words elsewhere never *quite* fit within the expected models of religion. “Soul” here is and is not linked to a larger theological discourse. It is ambiguous, resisting easy categorization.

This brings us back to Thea. Or, more particularly, this brings us back to Thea’s concrete animality described over and again through language of divinity. Thea has “divine versatility” in her soft requests for help, offers “a kind of goodness that nourishes the soul” when she touches the narrator.²⁵ The “divine versatility” of Thea is her ability to accept human limitation without frustration or anger. Thea wants but does not expect, asks but does not usher ultimatums. She carries her will always with the distinct sense that it incompatible with others around her. She accepts the narrator as an individual, bound to a different ethical system. For the narrator, this acceptance seems so much like divinity.

The religious language does not obfuscate her animality.²⁶ Instead, it accentuates it, drawing upon key elements of her cathood as demonstrations of her grace or as

Cixous’s use of “caress” recalls Jean-Luc Nancy’s writing on “caress.” Nancy understands the caress to be a kind of touching that touches not a person or a thing but animality itself. The caress is laden with eroticism and touches passivity. The caressed, like Thea, is innocent of death. It does not know death even as death is an imminent possibility. That the woman is “caressed caressed” by touching Thea both reimagines power dynamics (the one who instigates this touching is made passive, is caressed) and draws the woman into a state similar to Thea: a way of living without death, even if only briefly. (See: Derrida, *On Touching*, 86-87).

²⁵ “Imitations of Thea,” 165-167; *Messie* 103-105.

²⁶ Within this project, I am choosing not to engage with Derrida’s concept of the divinanimal. While I acknowledge the importance of this figure within animal studies and Derrida’s own thinking, I believe the figure of the divinanimal is too vague and general a term to apply aptly to Thea as I am considering her. In a different project, the divinanimal would a useful avenue for understanding Cixous’s often religious menagerie. However, because of the intimate scope of this project and its particular focus on this singular cat in this singular relationship, I have chosen not to use it. (See: Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).).

avenues for religious experience. Petting Thea's fur "nourishes the body's starving soul."²⁷ Feeling Thea lay upon her chest absolves sin, disappears suffering and "submerges" her in joy.²⁸ Thea's cry is heard as that of an imploring God's.²⁹ In "The Cat's Arrival," the narrator says, "You pounced on me, not with the lightness of an angel but with the crushing weight of a God, one who smites the blind and the hesitant."³⁰ The different presentations of this religious power or potential characterize Thea as vivacious but also tender. She lives vibrantly, intensely, urging herself and her human companion onward into the world, but her presence also soothes, saves, affects.

The text explores Thea's divinity through her actions but also names it: Thea is a god. At times Thea is also God: the proper noun, the particular. In "Imitations of Thea," the narrator says, "Orders are what she gives, but one is free to obey or not obey... God implores me."³¹ Placing these sentences appositionally equates Thea with God. It performs and clarifies identity. Thea and God are one and the same. She gives orders, she implores. God gives orders that one may or may not obey. In other parts of the text, Thea is "a little ball of fur with a goddess inside" and "the supernatural."³² Cixous aligns her with divinity over and over again, but that divinity is often a general or capacious divinity. She is "a goddess" rather than "the Goddess." In the quote, "God implores me," however,

²⁷ "Imitations of Thea," 167.

In the original French: *Imitations du Thea* p. 105. « Je sens une bonté qui nourrit l'âme affamée dans le corps et il émane du toucher une enivrante gratitude, boissons sublime. »

²⁸ "Imitations of Thea," 166.

In the original French: *Imitations du Thea* p. 105. « La joie qui me submerge : d'une seconde à l'autre, oubli de la souffrance je suis toute pardonnée. »

²⁹ "Imitations of Thea," 165.

³⁰ "The Cat's Arrival," 26.

In the original French: *Arrivée du chat* p. 64. « Tu m'es tombe dessus, non pas avec la légèreté d'un ange, non, avec le poids écrasant du Dieu qui terrasse l'aveugle et l'hésitant. »

³¹ "Imitations of Thea," 165.

In the original French: *Messie* 103 « Dieu me prie. »

³² "The Cat's Arrival," 29 and 24.

Cixous names Thea “God.” Specific, singular. But not total and not permanently: a page later, Thea “turned toward the world that stretches beyond the world nose tipped toward God.”³³ Suddenly, there is a distance between Thea and God. There is space. Thea must turn her face upwards, point elsewhere, to look for an entity that she was and now is not.

The elusive “God” slipping through, around, within, and by Thea encapsulates the ambiguous relationship *Messie* holds with religion itself. Cixous invokes religious terms in *Messie* in a manner that expresses the relational dynamics between woman and cat. Because of this, these terms are bounded, encased within the private sphere of their relationship. Thea is “God” in relation to the woman. She is not, ontologically, God in a definitive and conclusive sense. Were she to encounter another human person, they would likely recognize her as a cat, nothing more. Only within the closed circuit of this woman and this cat does the religious language make sense. The language performs their intimacy—articulating both the woman’s investment and valuation in the cat and the cat’s behavior and attention to the woman.

A similar framework of religious articulation plays out across Cixous’s fictive worlds. As a particularly frequent figure within Cixous’s writing, Thea is given many names, many titles. In “Shared at Dawn,” she is a “holy little mistress of humility.”³⁴ Elsewhere, “Stigmata, or Job the Dog” portrays her as a “miniscule imperceptible never-awaited messiah” and “my daily prophet.”³⁵ *Messie* is flush with descriptions of Thea as

³³ “Imitations of Thea,” 166.

In the original French: *Messie* p. 104. »Tournée vers le monde qui s’étend après e monde le nez levé vers Dieu elle crie muette: »

Importantly, in both instances when Thea is connected to “God,” the French confirms the doubling of “Dieu.”

³⁴ Cixous, “Shared at Dawn,” *Stigmata: escaping texts*, (London, Routledge, 2005), 242.

³⁵ Cixous, “Stigmata, or Job the Dog,” *Stigmata*, 252.

a “goddess of infinity.”³⁶ She is magic.³⁷ Touching her incites wonderment and awe, filling the woman with a sense of “well-beingness.”³⁸ With an absent glance or a quick brush against the woman’s leg, Thea can forgive all her sins, heal her soul. So saturated with this valued and affective language, Cixous’s works lead us to a simple conclusion: Thea is a religious figure. A situational deity. A private messiah.

The intimate nature of Thea’s divinity makes it much easier to discount the religious language as simply metaphoric. If we take seriously the valuation of the religious terms, however, *Messie* opens up, deepens, becomes richer. While religious metaphors are indicative of intense feelings, charged relations, they also offer substitution: in their very act of indication, they expose the slight incongruency between the tenor and the vehicle.³⁹ Metaphors demonstrate similarity through the illusion of sameness. The metaphor depends upon its own impossibility, its own gesture of creative embellishment.

It would be simpler and cleaner, perhaps, to read *Messie* this way. To segregate “real” religious experiences from creative expressions that mimic and appeal to the affect of those experiences. It is a messier path—perhaps *Messie*-er—to accept Thea’s relational divinity because it necessitates a reconsideration of religion itself. Or, rather, it offers a religion that, like Thea herself, straddles the line between *poesis* and personal experience and refuses the reductive patterning of preexisting tropes.

³⁶ Cixous, *Messie*, 21; my translation.

³⁷ “Imitations of Thea,” 107; *Messie*, 105.

³⁸ “Imitations of Thea,” 166; *Messie*, 105.

³⁹ If we read Cixous’s writing a metaphoric, the tenor would be Thea, while the vehicle would be any number of the terms equated with her: i.e., God, goddess, prophet, etc..

The religion of *Messie* resists institutionalization in its acuity and contextuality. Thea's divinity is specific to her relationship to the woman. It is not transferable. It cannot be repeated or patterned. Thea is not a god for the masses; she is a god in relation. The religious language of *Messie* insists upon the validity of religious valuation without ceding to the scripts of preexisting institutionalized religions. Cixous calls Thea a messiah, but this messianism does not fit the molds of Christian or Judaic messianism. Thea is God, but this God is not exactly the biblical God. Thea's "God" nods at these traditions, recognizes the familiar manifestations, and yet also eludes, exceeds, escapes these tropes. This is, in part, because Thea is only a messiah in relation to the woman. The specificity of Thea's divinity holds her apart from the greater "messiah" trope. Because she is not a god for the masses, her messianism is markedly different from the greater heritage of messianism prominent within Christianity and Judaism. Instead, "messiah" more accurately describes her role within the relationship at a certain moment, articulating the value and affect circulating in relation between the woman and cat.

Thea's religious affect is not permanent: it bursts forth in a flash, then tapers, dissolves, as she moves away or as the woman focuses on other things. The instant of encounter felt in a touch or a glance, heard in a purr, provides the contained context of Thea's divinity. When she curls up on the woman's chest, her presence forgives all, but this forgiveness is not totalizing.⁴⁰ It exists in the moment. Life moves beyond that moment, as does the woman and the cat. More moments, more forgivenesses and salvations bubble up thereafter. They cycle. The relations ebb and flow and continue.

⁴⁰ "Imitations of Thea," 166; *Messie*, 104.

The narrator's appreciation of Thea's godliness presents a unique point of view that exists both "within religion" and yet "without religion's God."⁴¹ To put it another way, Thea's divinity is divine without having to conform to preconceived models of godhood or religiosity. By interpreting Thea's actions and body as divine, the narrator appeals to a new form of religiosity that offers salvation without the counterweight threat of damnation.⁴² Indeed, the religiosity of "God," "grace," and other terms used within *Messie* are necessarily relational. But this can be taken one step further: in addition to the religion of *Messie* being relational, the relationships of *Messie* are themselves religious.

Part of the puzzle of articulating Thea and her experience of relating to the woman is learning how to navigate the difference between them. Difference—between bodies, between species, between moralities and dispositions of living—is a kind of dance in *Messie*. Or perhaps it is a game of play in which the cat-cat Thea and her cat-human woman slowly circle each other, waiting for the other to pounce.⁴³ The characters are simultaneously held apart and tethered by the difference that reveals insurmountable boundaries between them. At once, however, difference also connects them, constituting

⁴¹ Irving Goh, "The Passion According to Cixous: From Human Blindness to 'Animots'," *MLN* (Vol. 125, no. 5 December 2010), 1053.

⁴² Irving Goh argues that Cixous writes with the animal perspective in order to sidestep the patriarchal frameworks central to Christianity and Judaism. By attending to the animals, she avoids accounting for The Fall, as animals were never banished from the Garden of Eden. Goh draws upon Derrida's arguments that animals never experienced the fall do not know the constant threat of damnation, and therefore experience a different relationship with the world.

⁴³ At several points in *Messie*, Cixous's protagonist identifies herself alongside Thea as a cat herself. On the surface, this cross-species identity seems to function more as an expression of selfhood that aligns with Thea's behaviors and perceived way of living. It also, however, articulates the intimacy and connection between the woman and the cat, demonstrating their bond through the blurring of their distinct identities. Even with this blend, however, there is a divide between the cat who is a cat and the cat who is a woman. The example of this blending that I consider most closely can be found in "Imitations of Thea," 166; *Messie*, 105.

their particular connection, and opening up the possibility for further learning, further bonding. A prime example of this is in the following passage:

Easy transposition: her hands her feet her mouth her glances her stomach her thighs her caresses the palms of her paws. I could lick her the way she licks me but I forbid myself. The difference between us is that she thinks that I am her kitten, an extension of her body, whilst I have to transgress the knowledge that she is not of my species. No, it is not that. I forbid myself but I'm not really sure why. I'm less free than she is. Or less generous? Less innocent.⁴⁴

The woman knows herself to be different from Thea on the level of species and the level of body. Despite this, she asserts that difference is not what holds her apart from Thea, not the thing that keeps her from “[licking] her the way she licks me.” Instead, she forbids herself the transgression of crossing the boundary of species. In other words, they are individuals of separate species, but the force that holds them apart is her own human ethics, her expectation and anticipation for proper human action—“I forbid myself,” “I’m less free,” “I’m not really sure,” etc..

This ethical anticipation and encounter of difference to animal studies and its potential constitutes what Matthew Calarco calls an “ethics of difference.”⁴⁵ When we “encounter the Other as *ethically different*, as radically different from me, as irreducible to my usual ways of understanding and my usual projects and interests,” we often “unthinkingly do violence” to them.⁴⁶ The ethical difference of Thea and the woman is in

⁴⁴ “The Cat’s Arrival,” 33

In the original French: Arrivée du chat 79 « – Transposition sans heurt : ses mains ses pieds sa bouche ses regards son ventre ses cuisses ses caresses les paumes de ses pattes. Je pourrais la lécher comme elle me lèche mais je me ‘interdis. La différence entre nous c’est qu’elle croit que je suis son chaton, un prolongement de son corps alors que moi j’ai à transgresser le savoir qu’elle n’est pas de mon espèce. Non ce n’est pas cela : je me l’interdis mais je ne sais pas clairement pourquoi. Je suis moins libre qu’elle. Ou moins généreuse ? Moins innocente. »

⁴⁵ Matthew Calarco, *Thinking Through Animals*, 32.

⁴⁶ Matthew Calarco, *Thinking Through Animals*, 31.

their distinct ways of understanding their own bodies in relation. For Thea, the woman is “her kitten, an extension of her body,” implying both a deep sense of familiarity and a responsibility.⁴⁷ Thea does not need to consider the difference. She needs only to care. For the woman, the separation of species and limited socially acceptable actions she feels bound to holds her apart from Thea physically and relationally. She denies herself connection, and, as a result, interrupts Thea’s impulse for connection.

Thea pounces, sprints, claws, jumps, mews, naps, and purrs. She lives as a cat. But she is also divine. She also saves the soul of the woman with each passing caress. Her embodiment, her actions, provide the vehicle for her divinity. Her impulses are a part of her way of living. She lives ferociously, with verve and gusto. She bursts forth into the world, urging onward, unaware or uncaring that the world is a dangerous place. Unaware that she could die from a passing truck, a loose brick, or a larger set of teeth.

Thea’s innocence is one of the characteristics leading the woman to call her divine. She does not know death. Death is not a legible factor of her mode of existence. To the woman, Thea’s unfamiliarity with death makes her immortal.⁴⁸ Too full of life and desire, she lives each day without regard for a future ending. She simply wants and therefore does. For the woman, this livelihood is equal parts enviable, shocking, and horrifying. The woman worries after the cat, knowing and seeing the dangers Thea does not. She sees “the cars, the dogs, the trucks, the enemies of cats, the carcasses of cats. She sees the gods and I see her body cut in two.”⁴⁹ The woman keeps Thea inside, denying

⁴⁷ “The Cat’s Arrival,” 33.

⁴⁸ “The Cat’s Arrival,” 28; *Messie*, 69.

⁴⁹ “The Cat’s Arrival,” 29.

In the original French: *Messie*, 71 « je vois les voitures les chiens les camions les ennemis des chats les charognes de chats, elle voit les dieux et je vois son corps coupé en deux. »

her the freedom of the outdoors for fear of the busy street.⁵⁰ The woman bemoans her own need to protect Thea, crying, “How I prevent her from living in preventing her from dying!”⁵¹ She pleads in prose, asking Thea to

Forgive me for loving you because love always prohibits the living of life at the speed of death. Forgive me for loving you because I pity myself as much as I do you and I grieve to death for the one who would lose you. I cannot allow you your death. I will not give it to you. I want to keep you.⁵²

Her human imposition denies Thea the freedom to run across the surface of everything: to scale the narrow balcony railing or leap across the chasm between branch and open window. The “speed of death,” is the second it takes to imagine Thea’s death and the second more to utter a sharp “No,” gives rise to prohibitions. The woman cannot allow Thea free reign of her life because her form of living does not account for the same risks, the same dangers as the human’s does.

The woman recognizes the cruelty of this denial. She hears Thea’s protests, her yowling out, “Let me go towards... Don’t place your walls, your bars, your fears, between my destiny and me.”⁵³ By refusing Thea the right to live freely, she introduces death into her life. In return, the knowledge and acute expectation of Thea’s eventual

⁵⁰ “The Cat’s Arrival,” 29 ; *Messie*, 71.

⁵¹ “The Cat’s Arrival,” 30.

In the original French : *Messie*, 72 « –Comme pour l’empêcher de mourir Je l’empêche de vivre! »

⁵² “The Cat’s Arrival,” 30.

In the original French: *Messie*, 73 « Pardonne-moi de t’aimer parce que l’amour interdit toujours de conduire la vie à la vitesse de mourir. Pardonne-moi de t’aimer parce que j’ai pitié de moi comme de toi et je plains à mourir celle qui t’aurait perdu. Ta mort je ne e la permets pas, je ne te la donne pas, je veux te garder. »

⁵³ “The Cat’s Arrival,” 29.

In the original French: *Messie*, 71. “Laisse-moi aller vers... Ne mets pas tes murs, tes barreaux, tes frayeurs entre mon destin et moi. »

death enters her own life.⁵⁴ She asserts her own ethics, foregrounds her own conception of the world over and against Thea's. And she knows this. She realizes that she "wants against your [Thea's] wishes."⁵⁵ Despite this pressure, despite the guilt she feels for her "misdeed," she cannot allow Thea to die. She prays in response: "let us hope that the softness of love is stronger than the harshness of No!"⁵⁶

The other presents us with a problem: their presence triggers a wave of vulnerability. Their individuality reveals the singularity of our own ethics. That they, perhaps, live with a different set of expectation, boundaries, moral valuations, or taboos demonstrates the limitations of ethics. They are not universal; they are particular. Where ethical codes seemed to be binding rules, now they are idiosyncratic.

The woman interprets Thea's otherness, idiosyncratic as it is, as unbound potentiality, pureness, and salvific rather than stupidity or perilous. Even in her resistance to Thea's individual desire for "the space without extremity or form," the woman recognizes the cat's vivacity as akin to divinity.⁵⁷ She sees this deathless living as exemplary of "divinity cloistered within feline finitude."⁵⁸ Thea's disregard for her own mortality makes her live as an immortal. She predicts Thea's eventual death, perhaps as a consequence of her recklessness, but still sees Thea's own logics of living within the fraught and stressful situation.

⁵⁴ "The Cat's Arrival," 28: "You have put death in my life! Stroked the woman. You, so small, so slight, you are the being who makes me feel dying at closest quarters."

In the original French: *Messie*, 69. « – Tu m'as mis la mort dans la vie ! caressait la femme. Toi, si petite, si rien, tu es l'être qui me fait sentir mourir de plus près. »

⁵⁵ "The Cat's Arrival," 29; *Messie*, 71.

⁵⁶ "The Cat's Arrival," 30; *Messie*, 72.

⁵⁷ "The Cat's Arrival," 29; *Messie*, 71.

⁵⁸ "The Cat's Arrival," 29.

In the original French: *Messie*, 70. « ...divinité cloîtrée dans le fini félin. »

Thea's unbridled fervor for life is ultimately attractive to Cixous—even as it is worrisome. As the woman grapples with overcoming her imposed limits onto Thea's life, her attention to their impossible difference gives way to speculation, awe, and appreciation for the effect Thea has on her.

The narrator's reception of Thea often centers on moments of touch. When Thea pounces on her, when Thea curls up on her chest—these moments of physical engagement fill the woman with a sense of religious ecstasy, of well-being. These moments are also importantly ordinary in so many ways. In contrast to their affective consequences, the touches shared between woman and cat are simply incidental interactions—a hand brushing up against fur, a playful bat, a convenient space for a nap. Despite the ordinary context of the touching, they affect the woman, leading her to call them “act[s] of grace.”⁵⁹ So simple are these acts that they are given “without acknowledgement.”⁶⁰ They are central and natural to the relationship, existing as formative events that, though powerful, are also expected and familiar.

The ordinariness of Thea's acts of grace, their unacknowledged production, once again demonstrates a key difference between woman and cat. Thea does not acknowledge her acts of grace because her actions are not a part of an exchange of good will. She does not wait for reciprocation.⁶¹ She simply acts. She simply lives. In doing so, she projects

⁵⁹ “Imitations of Thea,” 167; *Messie*, 105.

⁶⁰ “Imitations of Thea,” 167; *Messie*, 105.

⁶¹ I draw here upon Derrida and Nancy's distinction between a “gift” and an “exchange.” Derrida paraphrases Nancy in *On Touching*, explaining that a gift is something that is given without also giving up the self, without offering up the giver's name to await repayment. The gift must be unattached so as to truly, freely be given. Exchanges involve reciprocal action—even when this return action is simply recognition.

For more, see: Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, Translated by Christine Irizarry, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005), 94-95.

neither her own valuation onto the woman nor her own social norms. Her acts of grace demonstrate an ethical model of generosity as well as an acceptance of the individuality of the woman.

One might wonder at attributing such contentious generosity to a cat. I echo that wonder and offer this clarification: We cannot know Thea's intentions or interiority. But we do not need to. Her actions demonstrate an aloofness that is neither cold nor uncaring, yet she *does* affect the narrator, and she does not wait for reciprocation. She does not need to think or act in human structures of rationality in order to perform an ethics worth imitating.

Imitation plays a role in the relationship of Thea and the woman. Notably, this imitation is neither trivial nor parodic. It is, instead, a form of following. Cixous follows Thea—through *Messie* and through her larger body of work.⁶² Tracking her actions and her responses, Cixous charts a map of Thea's ethics. One might live by such a map. A map of living, of giving freely but expecting nothing, of loving the other *as other*.

Within *Messie*, this imitation, this following comes to a head as the woman recognizes Thea as “the cat whose cat I am.”⁶³ The woman is Thea's cat. She is a woman-cat as much as Thea is a cat-cat. Her cathood, however, is not sudden or spontaneous. It is relational. In the French, the relational ties become more apparent as

⁶² In Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* and Cixous's essay “Writing Blind,” following plays an important role. In Derrida's work particularly, following an animal is a way of seeing its path, attempting to understand its mode of being. He follows the cat in his writing process by running forth, turning back at a peculiar scent, rushing beyond, and pausing to listen. The pathway of animal activity provides a model of action, which, in its difference from human movement, offers new opportunities for thinking and perspectives. In Cixous's work, following is also tied to writing. The animal-like characterization of the book cannot be led or predicted, only followed. In both of these examples, importantly, the authors are required to submit themselves to an unfamiliar logics, a curious mimicry.

⁶³ “Imitations of Thea,” 166.

the woman says “*je touche au doux et farouche toucher de Thea la chatte dont je suis la chatte.*”⁶⁴ The phrase hinges upon *dont*, as does the connection between the woman and Thea. *Dont* stands as the connective tissue relating the cat that is Thea to the cat that is the narrator. It does this in a particular way: In the Segarra translation, *dont je suis la chatte* becomes “whose cat I am,” implying ownership, responsibility. This makes sense. It articulates the strong ties between woman and cat, rescripting the expected vectors of accountability and ownership. At once, however, the translation rearranges the latter half of the clause, *je suis la chatte* into “cat I am,” to make sense in English. By rearranging the words, Segarra implies a reciprocity of cathood. Thea herself is a cat who has a cat (that is the woman). While this accurately articulates the shifting identities of woman and cat, it does so in a somewhat muted tone and implies an abundance of cat, enough to go around.

A more literal—and significantly less beautiful—translation of “*je touche au doux et farouche toucher de Thea la chatte dont je suis la chatte,*” might look something like this: “I touch the sweet and ferocious touch of Thea the (female) cat of whom I am the (female) cat.” Note the definite articles. The cat. “Cat” here becomes a status, an identity. One might be the cat of the other. One might be the cat for the other. If we follow *Messie*’s model for what it is to be Thea, the cat, we can begin to outline the shape and relational function of the cat within this sentence.

While the definite articles in the sentence do not overwhelm the sentence’s implications, they do add to it, offering acute relational details. Writing that Thea is the

⁶⁴ *Messie*, 105.

cat of whom I am the cat implies both a fluidity and an equity in their relationship. Thea is not the cat of the woman. She is the cat. Definitive. Yet as “the cat,” she inhabits the role of the animal other, the somewhat domestic, the creature beholden to the woman. But the woman is the cat of Thea. Bounded in their relation, she takes on the role of the cat. This roleplay is a shifting, turning thing. Through relation, in relation, they encounter their interdependence.

The “of” incites its own collection of curiosities: it implies a kinship between the two of them, complicating and enriching the tones of ownership and responsibility. Kinship is not quite equity and not just responsibility. It is something else. It is a connection through blood and body and being. If Thea is “the cat of whom I am the cat,” are we to understand the woman as Thea’s kitten? Born of Thea? The daughter of this female (cat) God? Yet another roleplay dashes behind the scenes. A miracle play, a pantheon.

The cat that is Thea is divine, lives fully, and gives without expecting reciprocation. The woman takes on this mantle in relation to Thea, vowing to follow her lead, to give freely and live fully. We might wonder if, like her cathood, Thea’s divinity is transitive. Perhaps, the woman is Thea’s goddess insofar as she is Thea’s cat— imploring without expectation and reaching out to heal by hand, by paw, by stroke.

Like touching “the sweet, ferocious touch of Thea,” this cat roleplay is a meeting of boundaries and a creation of worlds.⁶⁵ Like the touch that meets another touch, this cat

⁶⁵ Erin Manning argues that bodies in relation create new worlds and new bodily forms. Touching and relating to the other, reconstitutes the body as more than itself, as part of the other to which it relates. In this creation of worlds, bodies become transitive. They are not passive *or* active but rather enact a fluid exchange of agency. “I” becomes less defined and bounded within a single bodily form. (See: Erin

is the cat of another cat. The creation of cats, the entering-into cathood for another, establishes a world within the relationship wherein the ethics of cathood is felt and lived by both members of the relationship. Like touch, being the cat of the other is a political endeavor. Becoming the cat of another affects the other and reinvents the self. By caring for Thea in the way that she does, the woman transforms Thea into one for whom she is the cat *and* is reinvented into that cat. The process develops and shifts their individual subjectivities because of, through, and by their relating.⁶⁶

Existing for One Another By Means of Touch

Touch is an encounter. Touch is the meeting of bodies—the meeting of bodies in space, of subjects. It is the momentary resituation of air molecules coursing and flowing around, thinning between the moving bodies as they come into contact. Touching is fundamentally a relational act, an act of plurality—a coming together of people, things, space, textures, surfaces.

Touching is not only a relational act wherein bodies meet. It is also a creative act: an inventive reconstitution of the self with the other as well as the self. “To touch is to engage in the potential of an individuation,” says Erin Manning.⁶⁷ Individuation reaches beyond the bounds of identity into a relational matrix. We recognize difference between

Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 2003), xxiii).

⁶⁶ Manning, *Politics of Touch*, xv.

⁶⁷ Manning, *Politics of Touch*, xv.

ourselves and others. This difference sculpts us, challenges us, and deterritorializes the body in order to defy “national body-politics, stable genders, political consensus.”⁶⁸

Because our bodies and our relations are always spilling outward into the world around us, relational changes enact political, social change. As Thea and the woman change one another and are themselves changed through this relation. In this transformative experience, they learn from and for one another, also affecting change within their larger social contexts. Through touch in particular, their individual identities flutter, shift, and reform.

It is worth noting that Cixous’s conception of touch is a capacious one. Not limited to physical contact, touching bleeds into the other senses. Haptic sight is a form of touch.⁶⁹ Hearing the voice of a loved one over the telephone is, too, a kind of touch wherein one life extends across space to witness briefly the living other.⁷⁰ The physicality of touch matters, but it functions both literally and metaphorically. That the woman physically, literally reaches out a hand to stroke Thea’s fur and feels herself submerged in well-beingness is significant. But it is also significant that the eye sees objects, “touching” them by seeing them. The encounter, felt as a metaphoric physical interaction, is just as potent a touch as the literal hand on fur.

⁶⁸ Ibid., xv.

Manning anchors her notion of politics with “the body’s tendency to relate.” Touching has political consequences because bodies move and relate within the world. Additionally, touch instantiates individuation, “the capacity to become beyond identity.” For Manning, relating disturbs preconceived notions of the self as a singular, sovereign entity. It extends the self beyond the body into the relation of bodies. Such extension further challenges the role, function, and concept of the body within political spheres.

⁶⁹ Hélène Cixous, “Savoir,” *Veils*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001), 9.

“She hadn’t realized the day before that eyes are miraculous hands, had never enjoyed the delicate tact of the cornea, the eyelashes, the most powerful hands, these hands hat touch imponderably near and far-off heres. She had not realized that eyes are lips on the lips of God.”

⁷⁰ Hélène Cixous, “Writing Blind,” *Stigmata: escaping texts*, (London, Routledge, 2005), 188.

Thea's acts of grace, her events of touch, bring both the bodies and identities of woman and cat closer together. It is in an embrace of this litany of encounters that the woman says, "I touch the sweet, ferocious touch of Thea the cat whose cat I am."⁷¹ Touch here stands in as representations of the body and descriptions of bodily actions. "I touch," says the woman, "the sweet, ferocious touch of Thea." Touch meets touch: touches are owned and distinct. And yet, at once, the foregrounding of "touch" over any particular body part blurs the separations between bodies and broadens the scope of touching. Rather than saying "my hand touches Thea's fur," the narrator pulls focus away from bodily difference and bodily particularity. We see, instead, touching. Different touching, different touches.

The bodies of Thea and the woman are made active, are made action, through this sentence construction. A verbal "touch" meets a direct object "touch." Both are implicitly transitive. Thea receives the action of the narrator, and yet her "touch" implies its own movement. A touch is, after all, an action as much as a noun. By touching the touch of Thea, the narrator engages in a two-way exchange. She touches and is touched by Thea. This navigation of touching remains textured and defined. Even through touch, the narrator recognizes Thea's as "sweet, ferocious." Each act of grace experienced throughout the text is another instance of this: touching touches.

But what does touching *do*? How does touch change us? Touching challenges notions of the self. Drawing upon an Aristotelian conception of touch as a troubling sense that refuses to separate itself from its reception, Erin Manning asserts that touch refuses

⁷¹ "Imitations of Thea," 166.

In the original French: Imitations du Théa p.105 « C'est avec émotion et nostalgie que je touche au doux et farouche toucher de Thea la chatte dont je suis la chatte. »

dichotomies of self and other by creating a third space, a “reciprocal body-space.”⁷² For Manning, as for Derrida, touching is a social event. It is the act of sharing. It creates a space, a worlding, by demanding that we attend to the in-betweenness of being, of bodies, of agency.⁷³ To simultaneously touch and be touched. To be active and passive. To give and receive—at once, the subject is object; at once, the body is vulnerable and threatening. This space-between is only ever in the present, the extended moment of contact. The world only exists in the moment of relation.

This world of in-between during which we touch, are touched, and create each other is both a “being-with” and a “being-without.”⁷⁴ As I touch you, I recognize your boundaries as well as my own. As I touch my cat, I recognize her fur, her whiskers, her paws. And I recognize that I do not have such characteristics. The one whose touch I touch cannot be collapsed into my own selfhood. Even so, we meet. We touch. We touch our mutual capacities *to touch*, and we touch with the intentional recognition of difference. In doing so, we create a myriad of possibilities—shapes, acts, movements.

Suddenly, touching seems like a very complicated, very daunting affair. Let us return to *Messie*: Perhaps the act of touching Thea’s touch is the event of recognizing her touch. It is the encounter with her active physical presence. Touching the sweet, ferocious

⁷² Aristotle claims that touch is the most troubling sense because the agency is always necessarily unclear. One cannot touch without being touched. Where, then, are the boundaries or designations to decide who is the toucher and who the touched? (See: Aristotle, “On the Soul,” Classics.MIT.edu, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.3.iii.html>).

Manning, *Politics of Touch*, 52.

For Manning, this “body-space” is a thirdness because it does not collapse into “self” or “other” and challenges the limitations of both terms. For Manning, touch necessitates this third space because the vectors of desire and reception disallow any singular understanding of what touch is doing, who is doing the touching, and how it functions.

⁷³ Derrida qtd. Manning, *Politics of Touch*, 13.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

touch of Thea is sensing the presence of Thea. By touch, too, the woman recognizes Thea's ability to touch and feel her presence. In this way, the event of touch balloons outward. It also raises the stakes of touch itself. Touch as a relational, world-making endeavor is a political act, has greater, wider resonance beyond the bounds of the two individuals touching. Engaging in relations that remake the self implicates this private and situational religious companionship in the larger circuits of relation and greater collectives of social interaction.

Cixous's writing insists that the event of touch is also a moment of alteration, merging, and shifting. For Cixous, touch invites or presents the potential for intersubjective exchange—the changing of selves, the transference of bodies, identities, and subjectivities. A touch is also the moment or event of connection when two lives briefly brush against one another in concern. In *Messie*, this brief brush of a touch figures metaphorically and literally as a kind of telephoning.

Telephones are important for Cixous. They are immediate, connecting beings across any number of miles in an instant. They allow one to communicate long distance in a way few other technologies would allow.⁷⁵ By telephone, a voice meets a voice, a life recognizes another life. Spanning distances of space and sometimes times, telephoning is an act of touching. Of uniting. Of communicating and communing.

⁷⁵ There are current technological advances such as video communications that function similarly or more efficiently than telephones, but I have chosen not to engage these here on account of anachronism.

Telephones are a matter of life and death.⁷⁶ With once call, you can confirm the distant presence of the other, hear their voice, check that they are okay. When it comes to an animal companion—one who does not share the same language, who cannot communicate at long distance—this crucial act of telephoning must take on a new shape, perform a new task: telephoning across the divide of species. Articulating this, the woman explains,

Here's what my cat and I have come up with: we telephone in person. So several times a day she comes to give me a little telephone call on the leg, using her own body briefly as apparatus, for the number she rubs: everything fine?—Everything is fine. And she hangs up reassured. As for me, able to call long distance, several times a day to do her number I whistle three notes like this: : : and from the end of the world she pops everything is fine. Two different kinds of life which exist for one another by means of touch.⁷⁷

Telephoning here is an agreement, an arrangement configured by the woman and the cat. Perhaps out of desperate need to communicate, or joyous creative energy. In Cixous's conception, the body becomes a machine in motion, an "apparatus" for calling. Like touching, telephoning is active *and* receptive. To touch is to telephone, to communicate, to call. Thea's query of "everything fine?" is, itself, the number. Put another way, Cixous's metaphor of telephoning in person does not entail a long conversation rewritten in the form of certain touches, certain movements. Rather, to touch the other is akin to dialing their number. It is the act of reaching out toward them, extending oneself in the

⁷⁶ "Imitations of Thea," 172; *Messie*, 115.

⁷⁷ "Imitations of Thea," 172.

In the original French: *Messie*, 115 « Voilà ce que nous avons trouvé mon chat et moi: nous allons nous téléphoner en personne. C'est ainsi qu'elle vient plusieurs fois par jour me donner un petit coup de téléphone sur la jambe, en se servant brièvement de son propre corps comme appareil, pour le numéro elle frotte : tout va bien ?—Tout va bien. Et elle raccroche calmée. Moi de mon cote qui puis appeler à distance plusieurs fois par jour pour faire son numéro je siffle trois notes comme ceci : : : et du fond du monde elle surgit tout va bien. Deux vies d'espèce différente qui prennent vie l'une à l'autre, par le contact. »

other's direction. What matters is that one party dials and the other picks up the "phone." Telephoning in *Messie* is not having a conversation in a familiar or single language. To have a conversation would be to find a rational meeting point. It would be an area of sameness, effectively erasing the insurmountable species difference central to *Messie*. Thea and the woman do not share a common language. They cannot speak. Instead, they telephone: touching toward, grazing the surface of the other in order to find life.

Telephoning for Thea and the woman arrives out of concern and care. These "two different kinds of life" twirl around each other, intersecting to ensure the other's continued wellness before spinning off again.⁷⁸ It is only after Thea confirms the woman's wellness, her "Everything is fine," that she can "hang up reassured."⁷⁹ For Cixous, this ritual of telephoning indicates that the lives of the woman and Thea "exist for one another by means of touch."⁸⁰ In the French, "*Duex vies d'espèce différente qui prennent vie l'une à l'autre par le contact*," more directly says "Two lives of different species who draw life from one another, by contact." Their lives are drawn and shaped in relation. They sustain through interaction and connection. In other words, their mutual existence is not simply a gesture or gift. They are not living on behalf of the other. Rather, their lives are sustained and nourished through contact.

The act of telephoning in person, telephoning by touch, bonds the characters, allowing them to communicate with one another and ease their concern. Cixous's act of telephoning is more than a method of speaking long distance. It is a way of confirming life. Telephoning sidesteps sight in this confirmation. Unable to see the other who is far

⁷⁸ "Imitations of Thea," 172; *Messie*, 115.

⁷⁹ "Imitations of Thea," 172; *Messie*, 115.

⁸⁰ "Imitations of Thea," 172; *Messie*, 115.

away, telephoning allows you to hear them. To be touched by their voice, thus confirming their continued existence in this world. In the case of Thea's touch telephoning, it entails feeling the body of the other—just briefly, just enough to know “Everything is fine.”⁸¹

Telephoning in person foregrounds physical interaction between Thea and the woman. While the woman can whistle three notes, call Thea, and see her rise from the end of the earth, this is not enough. It might confirm presence but not well-being. The physical interaction between Thea and the woman is a way of communicating wellness. It does so *for* the other. The two figures check in on one another, making sure they are well in relation to one another. The act of checking, too, is done for and with the other.

Telephoning through touch also prioritizes the transitive capacity of physical touch. Other kinds of touch, such as the haptic vision or hearing, importantly attend to the meeting of subjects, but they are one-way actions. That one hears something does not necessarily mean they are also heard. Likewise, one can see something or someone without being seen themselves. Physical touch does not work like this. Touch is necessarily transitive. It is also intentional.⁸² One intentionally touches the other and, in doing so, is touched by the other.

Telephoning through touch turns this worlding space of in-betweenness into a moment of community and care. By checking in on one another to ensure their mutual

⁸¹ “Imitations of Thea,” 172; *Messie*, 115.

⁸² Manning, *Politics of Touch*, 12.

Sight and hearing are senses that do not require active effort. You can *happen* to see something or someone just as you can *happen* to overhear things. There is a fine distinction between the strain and intention of listening and looking—but these are actions, not senses. One looks and, by looking, uses their sense of sight. Touch does not separate this because to sense *is* to act.

well-being, their touches not only disturb the boundaries of selfhood and otherness, but also create, within that third space, a communal bonding opportunity.

Telephoning is always more than simply telephoning. Cixous notes that, “If one pays attention then this is life humbly appealing on the phone for life. But it can’t be a question without an answer, that would be terrible. One is asking permission to go on living. And the permission is an order: live.”⁸³ The touching between woman and cat is as much an exercise in self-preservation as it is companionship. By telephoning—be it through touch or voice—one begs to witness the presence of the other, and, in receiving that presence, the recognition of their own life. Thea rubbing against the woman’s leg, “everything OK?” is the request to see, know, feel her alive and present. It is also the request to *be* seen, be known, be felt. It is a dance of sorts by which they exist. They draw life from one another, they “exist for one another by means of touch.”⁸⁴

For Cixous, the physicality of their connection only strengthens their bond: in lieu of words by which one might hear a command, the woman and cat touch. Their language and communication are written in and through the body, relaying messages, affection, need, and comfort directly onto the skin or fur. It is, perhaps, “the poetry of poetry the dumb emotion arising from the phrases that graze the legs with the chastity of absolute passion” that Thea and the woman feel.⁸⁵ The “dumb emotion” of words that are not words makes the order of living an impulse from within the body. Instead of rationalizing the order, understanding, or knowing it, one feels it.

⁸³ “Imitations of Thea,” 172; *Messie*, 116.

⁸⁴ “Imitations of Thea,” 172; *Messie*, 115.

⁸⁵ “Imitations of Thea,” 172; *Messie*, 116.

The “poetry of poetry” that is touching creates connection, beings, and community. *Poesis*, making, creating, flows through these bodies in relation, bringing into being the relational in-betweenness. Poetry, creative capacity, is found in touch. The poetry of Thea and the woman’s touch speech recalls the work and affect of Cixous’s religious language.

Within the realm of *Messie*, touch is salvific. It heals and helps, and forgives. The woman’s experience of touching and being touched by Thea instigates religious experience and divine blessings. The touch that troubles the boundaries between self and other, creating a between-space of creative individuation, is religious. Religion articulates the experience of co-individuation. For Cixous, religious language usefully illustrates the sensation and experience of this process.

What is truly astounding is that, as I have already expressed, this language sits in the ambiguous space between the literal and the metaphoric. Thea is a God *and* “God” expresses her affective presence. Bringing this to bear on instances of touch within *Messie*, we reevaluate the role of religion within the text. Telephoning in person is a ritual of sorts. It involves communing with the divine. When Thea brushes up against the woman’s leg, her touch mingles with the touch of the woman—her divinity, too, is touched, is felt. Thea is reformed through touch, made divine through touch. And, through touch, the woman attempts to follow Thea’s models of behavior in order to connect more closely and live more fully.

The religion of *Messie* is not about sin or purity: it is about connection. As the woman connects with Thea, she feels herself heal. Her life is better for Thea’s presence. In their ritual of touch-telephoning, she draws life from this magic little cat. Because of

this, there is no center or origin for Thea's divinity. She is divine because the woman is so affected by her presence and her presence affects the woman because she is divine. The woman draws life from her just as much as she draws life from the woman. *Messie's* religion brings divinity nose to nose with humanity, inviting an interplay between their subjectivities.

Learn Love without Obligation from a Cat

As *Messie* ultimately attests, there is much to gain from following a cat. There is much to learn from following this cat, Thea. Or your cat. Or my cat. In a trailing line of stripes and tails, whiskers and curiosity, we can unwind an ethical moral to this tale. Not a prescriptive or normative moral, but a didactic ethics with the potential for repetition.

Messie unfolds the interplay of relationality between woman and cat. Through their mutual relating, reacting, and caring, these figures address the problem of difference. Whether the difference is that of species, logics, desires, or life, difference inserts itself into every interaction, into every moment of relation. *Messie*, in part, performs a navigation of such problems. Its characters careen and swerve around one another in a dance to remain together. Reading, watching, listening to their movements invites us, the audience, to consider our own relations to animals, to others. It may not be prescriptive, but it is potentially applicable.

The ethics of *Messie* revolves around the species divide of woman and cat. Human impulses are separated, differentiated, from cat impulses. Written in human

language, Thea's desires are only ever thinly explored. They are guesswork—roughly sketched shapes based upon her observed actions. Yet these approximate desires are markedly distinct from the woman's. Thea wants to live freely, untethered to dangers and limitations of mortality. The woman can do no such thing. She is touched by the fall, and affected by an ever-present and acute prescience of her own eventual end. Such knowledge prohibits certain forms of living. The woman's ways of living and ways of knowing spill over the edges of her life and into the boundaries of Thea's. As beings intertwined, existing for each other, their individual perspectives are always implicated in the other's. Their lives together call for a continual and thoughtful navigation of relational ethics.

Messie's ethical engagement does three things for its readers: it challenges us to reconsider how we might conceive of our animal companions—how we value them, what we call those relational vectors, how much we project a human logic onto them. Additionally, it asks us to, perhaps, challenge those forms of relation. The narrator's questions are open to us, inviting us to ask them ourselves. As such, we might reevaluate our relationships with animal companions, perhaps even animal strangers. Finally, eventually, *Messie* encourages a ballooning of this ethical awareness. Onto what other Others do we project our own minds and perceptions? How might we engage in an appreciation of alterity in an effort to love? To touch?

We follow these others, these animals, these cats, perhaps newly seeing their actions as a different way of existing rather than stubborn refusal to cede to our own codes of conduct. Further, these others live without falling into the human trap of expectation, the conceit of an ethical colonization wherein we assume and demand that

the world be filtered through our own mode of existence.⁸⁶ Perhaps, in our act of following, tracking, the animal other, we might begin to mimic their steps. Placing our foot firmly over their imprinted animal print, perhaps we might accept the different in size, in shape, in tread—marveling nonetheless, valuing all the more.

Ethics thus ties to imitation. Ethics informs the woman's claim that Thea is "the cat for whom I am a cat."⁸⁷ It is not a replication of form or function but a stepping into the footprints of the other. This stepping, this performance of cathood, is not a whimsy, it is *for* the other. But unlike empathy, which seeks to understand and feel the emotional experience of the other, this ethical engagement seeks to move beyond similitude into difference. *Messie*'s portrait of the woman who becomes the cat of her cat demonstrates the strong relational bonds felt between woman and cat through mimicry and, consequently, destabilizes the definitive standing of species difference entirely.

What does "cat" mean when one can take on the guise of "cat" for another? What is it to be the "cat" of the other? Certainly, it no longer stands as a biological category, describing species certitude. Instead, "cat" takes on new meanings and new implications. The play of being a cat *for*, being a cat *with*, and being a cat *to* shift and merge the identities of both Thea and the woman. In doing so, they also imply a congruent dissolution of the category of "woman," of "human."

⁸⁶ I draw here upon anti-humanist theorists who resist the impulse to make the human species the pinnacle of all valuations and the comparison by which we gauge all other valuations (i.e. in measurements of dexterity, intelligence, communication skills, etc.). Anti-humanist theorists of difference, then, want to restructure the way we approach other beings by appreciating the ways they are decidedly not human—not as a point of valued comparison. As a facet of their individual being.

⁸⁷ *Messie*, 105; my translation.

The unspooling of these categories does not absolve the characters of their difference entirely, permanently, or conclusively. Rather, the relationship between these characters steps over the difference without removing or disregarding it. It is not a method of relating by finding similarity. It is a method of relating through, by, with, for, and in spite of difference. Both figures step outside their respective categories, carrying with them their different histories, into a closed relational circuit wherein those categories cease to matter.

This effect, like Thea's religious effect on the narrator, is not totalizing. Like so many of the startling and curious aspects of this pair, their de-categorized relation does not last forever or everywhere. It is an experience bound to their private sphere. In another context, in another social group, Thea will be recognized as cat and the woman will be seen as a human woman. Their treatment of each other does not play by the rules and boundaries of "cat" and "woman," but they do not destroy or leave the system of categorization entirely.

Before I finish, I offer this short digression. A necessary reminder: Thea and the Cixousian narrator do not exist in a vacuum. Their relationship works up its own interior velocity, a rising tide of energy and intensity through their particular and private interactions. But that relationship has a context. It foregrounds a larger field of relations consisting of the woman's family, lover, and human community. Attending to these external relationship complicates the model of ethical, divine relation as seen between Thea and the woman. It also considers the complexity of enacting their category-blurring

relationship against, amidst, through, and around social pressures that seek to reaffirm human exceptionalism.

Even contained as it is within their insular connection, the bond between the woman and cat does have a palpable effect on people close to the woman. The woman's family—regular counter voices within “The Cat's Arrival”—continually comment on what they see as a perverse arrangement between woman and cat. To them, the woman invests too much time and energy on the cat. She has abandoned her family for the sake of an animal.⁸⁸ Even worse, she has introduced an animal into the household, upending the preexisting, human relational dynamic. They criticize Thea as well, seeing her as a “monkey” and a disruption.⁸⁹ They see none of the grace and divinity the woman sees in Thea, feel none of the warmth and salvation she feels. They worry that neighbors, friends, and the world watches the woman as she devotes herself to this little stray beast. They worry that they will become objects of ridicule.⁹⁰

The family closes off their relation to Thea, such that, to them, she can only ever be a cat. An undesirable cat at that. They dislike and disavow Thea.⁹¹ In their disavowal, however, there is an undercurrent of recognition: there is jealousy. The family resents Thea for her intimacy with the woman. The woman's mother fears that her preoccupation with Thea will give way to an unadulterated attachment to other animals.

Hippopotamuses, bears, dogs: her home will give way in a stampeded of nonhuman bodies and “topsy-turvy” priorities.⁹²

⁸⁸ “The Cat's Arrival,” 27; *Messie*, 67.

⁸⁹ “The Cat's Arrival,” 34; *Messie*, 82.

⁹⁰ “The Cat's Arrival,” 33; *Messie*, 80.

⁹¹ “The Cat's Arrival,” 34; *Messie*, 82.

⁹² “The Cat's Arrival,” 31-32; 27; *Messie*, 76.

The woman's aunt complains: "In this house the cat comes before the guests. And on top of that you're snubbed if you leave the window open."⁹³ The woman's mother resents the power Thea has over her daughter, over the household—especially as it stand in contrast with her own labor in the kitchen. Even the city gets a voice, claiming that "she's given in to a cat,/ she's lost her mind,/ and upset her family's house..."⁹⁴ This chorus of discontent volley against the woman's attachment to Thea, pressuring her to abandon the cat, to let it live its life out on its own.

The family's reaction to Thea stems from both their inability to understand the value of a cat and from the realignment of relational dynamics signaled by Thea's entry into the family space. Their expectations of relational ethics are distinctly different from Thea's. They do not love without expectation or reciprocation. The crux of their irritation is their sense that the woman has faulted on a debt—an obligation to attend to them, to prioritize human life over others. And, in a way, she has abandoned such an obligation by siding with Thea against the "human class."⁹⁵

While the woman experiences her connection to Thea as a blessing, the family sees it as damnation. The woman's investment in Thea, her almost idiosyncratic attention to Thea's needs, Thea's mortality, and the pleasure of interacting with Thea sets her apart from the family. Her family interprets this attention as a prioritization of Thea's life, of her relationship to Thea over her relationship to them. She is a traitor to her human

⁹³ "The Cat's Arrival," 27.

In the original French: *Messie*, 67 « Dans cette maison le chat passe avant les invités. Et en plus on se fait rabrouer quand on laisse la fenêtre ouverte. »

⁹⁴ "The Cat's Arrival," 26.

In the original French: *Messie*, 65. « elle cède à un chat, / elle perd la raison, / elle ébranle la maison de sa famille, »

⁹⁵ "The Cat's Arrival," 22; *Messie*, 55.

connections. Her attention to Thea forces the rest of the unwilling family to attend to a creature that they do not value. Because they do not value her, the woman's relationship with Thea becomes suspect. They cannot understand the woman's way of living any more than they could Thea. She, like Thea, becomes a cat, foreign, disliked for her unwanted disruption.

The family's dislike of Thea also stands in contrast to the figure of the woman's lover, a man named Aeschylus who exists obliquely within the text. The reader is never quite sure of whether he is truly present, or whether he exists predominantly in memory as a retrospective conversant. The woman consults this lover, reflecting on her relationship with Thea. He acts as a sounding board for her own processing—he voices the very questions that trouble her, allowing her the opportunity to answer them in a drawn out contemplation. When she worries after Thea, he provides the second voice for a philosophical dialogue considering the right for a human to impose her own knowledge of mortality onto the vibrant life of a being untethered to death.⁹⁶

Unlike the family, the lover does not speak against Thea. He vocalizes some of the same concerns the family does over the woman's public image, but these comments are more mentions of the situation rather than pointed accusations. He is, instead, somewhat vacant, devoid of personal interest or opinion. Any dynamism to his character comes into play when his figure blends and merges with Thea.

The lover's body and persona blend with Thea, but he does so in a distinctly different way than the woman. Aeschylus's character is wielded, portrayed. His cathood

⁹⁶ "The Cat's Arrival," 30; *Messie*, 72.

is not a result of his intimacy with Thea, nor any desire for ethical imitation. Instead, the woman paints Aeschylus catlike. She draws connections between them—interpreting him as a cat through his unpredictable physicality and casting Thea as a lover through her surprising intimacy. Another set of roleplays, the triangular relation between woman, cat, and lover further complicates the relationship between woman and cat.

Thea and the lover are closely tied figures within *Messie*. They blur together, tip into one another. The reappearance of one into the woman's life mimics the reappearance of the other. The first evening the woman forgets to shut her door, allowing Thea to enter her room at night. Thea promptly climbs onto the bed, surprising the woman by placing a brazen kiss on her lips.⁹⁷ The moment stands in as a testament to Thea's selfless love. Despite the woman's repeated refusal, Thea still wants to enter the room. She still kisses the woman. The kiss is a thanks, thanking "the hostess for having saved her from the hell into which she herself had thrown her."⁹⁸ The kiss represents Thea's practice of "love without obligation."⁹⁹ Through this kiss, the woman understands that "Goodness resided with the little one who had never suspected the violent thoughts harboured by the woman underneath her show of hospitality."¹⁰⁰ Thea's gratitude overwhelms and shocks the woman. Her lack of suspicion signals a disregard for past deeds, a refusal to tally a record of favors.

⁹⁷ "The Cat's Arrival," 22; *Messie*, 55.

⁹⁸ "The Cat's Arrival," 22.

In the original French: *Messie*, 54. « ... elle s'en vint remercier son hôtesse de l'avoir sauvée de l'enfer dans lequel elle-même l'avait jetée. »

⁹⁹ "The Cat's Arrival," 37; *Messie*, 88.

¹⁰⁰ "The Cat's Arrival," 22.

In the original French: *Messie*, 55. « La bonté était du côté de la petite qui jamais n'avait soupçonné les violentes pensées de la femme cachées sous les gestes de l'hospitalité. »

The woman responds to the kiss also by comparing it to the act of a lover. She calls Thea “her mistress,” recognizes the kiss as “the [gesture] of a lover,” and “an infinite tenderness.”¹⁰¹ With that particular touch, the woman decides, “This is not a distant cat. If this was only a temporary cat her heart would not be held in its paws nor the body of her soul dressed in its fur.”¹⁰² She feels utterly bewitched by the cat, astounded by the perplexing makeup of their intimacy. What should, could one call such a relationship?

Though Thea often plays the role of the lover, her character never collapses into a human form. She does not become Aeschylus, though he sometimes seems to become her. Thea remains a cat even when aligned with the lover archetype. All her demonstrations of affection and terms of endearment are rooted in, expressed by, and directed toward her in a cat body. In contrast, the man often becomes cat-like. He “yowls,” “runs,” “cries,” and “spits.”¹⁰³ His cat-hood plays out in that ambiguous space between literal and metaphorical phrasing. It attributes a feral animality to his human form, turns his body into something animal-adjacent.

Using cat imagery to describe the lover appeals to the value the woman gives to Thea in order to communicate her value of Aeschylus. He becomes more valued, more beloved, and perhaps a little divine through her characterization blending. At once, portraying Thea as a lover filters her actions and their intimacy through a model of relation that may not exactly fit—as the woman argues, their relationship is “not in the

¹⁰¹ “The Cat’s Arrival,” 22.

Curiously, Cixous’s narrator claims that her relationship with Thea is “not in the least sexual.” Instead, her reactions to Thea—the pleasure she derives from interacting with her—is a kind of “well-beingness.” This “well-beingness” affects her soul, feels like “sorts of magic.” (See also: “Imitations of Thea,” 166-167).

¹⁰² “The Cat’s Arrival,” 22.

In the original French: *Messie*, 56. « Ce n’est pas un chat lointain. Si c’était un chat de passage elle n’aurait pas le cœur pris dans ses pattes, le corps de l’âme vêtu de sa fourrure. »

¹⁰³ “The Cat’s Arrival,” 30-31; *Messie*, 73.

least sexual”—but does carry with it the appropriate affective weight and value of their relationship.¹⁰⁴

Messie offers this constellation of relationships to its readers, texturing the world of the characters and offering a more complex network of interpersonal relationships. While *Messie* predominantly focuses on the connection between Thea and the narrator, attending to the other attachments within the text remains an important task. These other relationships constantly verge on and careen into the closed circuit of relation between Thea and the woman. The family pressures the woman to abandon Thea. The woman ruminates on the similar intensities between her ties to her lover and to her cat, ever attempting to prioritize one over the other. These relationships inflect and challenge Thea and the woman. They throw the intensity of their connection into sharp relief, demonstrating the ways it is particular to the two of them and the ways their relationship models differ from others each character experiences.

Even as secondary aspects of the text, these other relationships affirm that the world of *Messie*, like our own world, is peopled. It is busy and complicated. The woman’s investment in Thea’s character and wellbeing has a cost: it impinges upon the human relationships because it threatens the prescribed social queues accepted within that community.

Loving a cat, deifying a cat, is an endeavor. Even as a consequence organic relationship development, this behavior involves and demands a choice: One must choose to side with animals “against the human class.”¹⁰⁵ Perhaps not totally. Perhaps not

¹⁰⁴ “Imitations of Thea,” 166; *Messie*, 105.

¹⁰⁵ “The Cat’s Arrival,” 22; *Messie*, 55.

completely. But enough to decide that animals are individuals, are others rather than objects.

This ethical demand, this choice, soon becomes radical ethical action.

Restructuring one's relationship to animals, perhaps to a cat, revalues animals as individuals, challenges traditional hierarchies that prioritize humans over other animals, and provokes an ethics of engagement, care, hospitality, difference, and responsibility that might be overlooked otherwise. It is far easier to ignore the individual wills and lives of animals when they are objects at the disposal of human whim. To accept animals as beings whose lives are not of lesser value but rather, simply, different structure.

But *Messie* is not only asking its readers to reconsider the worth of a cat, the value of an animal. It also asks its readers to witness the particular mode of love and relation as exists between the woman and Thea. It asks us to “learn love without obligation from a cat.”¹⁰⁶ Thea's demonstration of grace, of unexpectant love stuns and reshapes the woman. It converts her. Ultimately, for Cixous, Thea's ability to love without awaiting recompense or reciprocation reveals an animal capacity for compassion, individuality, and love that far outpaces anything demonstrated by humanity.

We can learn a lot from following a cat, stepping after her steps, into her footprints, and, perhaps, becoming a little more “cat” ourselves. By reevaluating the role and assumptions we make about animals, our relationships with them become richer, more ethical. We can perhaps come to appreciate the difference in the animal other as an

¹⁰⁶ “The Cat's Arrival,” 37; *Messie*, 88.

integral and valuable aspect of their individuality, something to encourage diverse relations rather than establish hierarchal distinctions that prioritize human attributes.

I do not attempt to prescribe a normative ethics. I couldn't if I tried. I do not believe that Cixous's model of ethics between humans and animals offers a pattern for exact replication. One cannot "put on" Cixous's ethics like a pair of glasses, seeing animals wholly anew. It is a practice and a discipline that can only be learned through doing. It is a skill honed through relating in particular, meaningful relations. Each relationship is a unique and specific blending of individuals, and, as such, a Cixousian ethics of relation needs to be individually developed between the members of any single relationship. Any Cixousian animal ethics would collect a network of iterations rather than print out an endless stream of repetitions. Such an ethics, then, is a map instigating unique journeys and experiences of relationality. Following such a map, such a cat, and such an ethics invites an *individual* opportunity for new human/animal connections that value difference, love without obligation, and confuse oppositional positions of "human" versus "animal."

She Came to Love: An Outro, a Reflection

Oftentimes, I feel her before I see her. A sensing of sorts, a raised hair on the back of my neck, the knowledge of being watched. Then: she appears. Quietly leaping onto my desk to get a better view through the window, to watch birds and squirrels in their manic

travels. Sometimes I receive an appreciative touch of her nose onto my knuckles. Just a touch: a hello. Sometimes, nothing. Sometimes it is enough to be near.

I think about her curious appearance—for, with her, it is always curious. She enters a room as a wisp of smoke, ephemeral and indescribably soft. Her eyes: two golden disks, iridescent, appraising, wanting something always. Curious to feel so closely tied to someone so distant, to such a stranger.

And then she chirps: a light trill to summon my attention. And I think back to Thea, to the woman so stunned by her mysterious companion. Ushered by her chirp, by the cold nudge of her impossibly small nose, *Messie* makes so much sense—not necessarily rationally, not on the level of a sentence. But underneath my skin, nestled into the crook of my bones. In a resonance humming along the networks of my nerves.

It is a strange thing to write a thesis that refuses to stay a thesis, that stubbornly reaches a paw out from the page, swiping playfully at me and the characters that populate my story. A ghostly Thea wanders my halls and my mind, offering inspiration with a quick flick of her tail. She follows my cat Sigil, embeds herself in each of our interactions. The effect is startling and surprising: a conference of magical, godly cats rushing within and without the writing of a book, this thesis, and the space that exists outside either text—life.

The deeper I crawl into this text, the more time and space I give its messages, the more it reshapes my own engagement with my cat as well as my engagement with others. It seems that, from the very start, Thea had wandered out from between the covers of Cixous's book, kissed me, and changed the course of what this work would be.

Hélène Cixous wrote *Messie* with her own life, her own cat, firmly woven into its fabric. It was a pattern I hadn't intended to follow. I tried to hold Sigil back from the keys of my computer. Tried to keep her from leaping along the letters, sniffing words, and littering the margins with little gray hairs. But she pushed forward. She made herself known in each paragraph, in each reading. She crouches, hiding behind the pages of words, batting at the reader with a small, spectral jab.

There are, of course differences. By and large, everything I have written has been referring to Cixous's writing, Cixous's life. Not mine. And yet, I found I could not write about Thea, and the woman's transformative connection to Thea, without feeling the effects of that transformation seep into my life, informing how I related to my cat. Having a living animal so vibrantly existing beside me as I wrote this work affected its production. The relationship of the text was always a live relationship. Its truth always apparent. In part, this was because a similar iteration of that relationship was always playing out in my room, in my life.

Consequently, my relationship to Sigil has profoundly changed since writing this thesis and reading this book. It was *because* of its attention to the relationship between a woman and her cat—inflected with religion, filled with grace, and fundamentally premised upon an acceptance of mutual individuality—that I found myself reflecting on my own practices and presumptions. My own valuations. The book offered to me with open hands a vocabulary for thinking through my investment, wonder, and care for this small little being whose interpretation of the world around her is so utterly different than mine. It has, in many ways, been a gift.

No small part of me hopes that, in kind, you too might grasp some of the magic of *Messie* in your hands, find glimpses of Thea in your daily lives sneaking around a corner or leaping onto a table just in your periphery. Perhaps this project will help imprint some sight change in your relationships, enrich the way you approach difference in others.

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