

Article

Animal Dystopia in Marie Darrieussecq's Novel *Truismes*

Päivi Koponen

Department of Humanities, University of Turku, 20014 Turun yliopisto, Finland; pjkopo@utu.fi

Received: 22 May 2017; Accepted: 23 August 2017; Published: 25 August 2017

Abstract: The article focuses on the contemporary French author Marie Darrieussecq's dystopian novel, *Truismes* (1996), that contemplates the differential boundaries between human and non-human existence within the scope of contemporary Western metaphysics. The novel challenges the anthropocentric conception of dystopia on the grounds that it is not only a *human* dystopia; the story centres on a female protagonist whose body begins to turn into a sow. In the novel's dystopian reality, non-human nature has only capitalistic value in relation to human needs, which has caused a large-scale ecological crisis. For the heroine, the dystopian cityscape is the antagonist that she struggles against; the story represents the sow-woman looking for a better place to live. By giving a narrative voice to an animal, Darrieussecq's novel urges the reader to identify with the non-human world. The article aims to come to an understanding of the agency beyond the human species. Further, it argues that agency constitutes an entanglement of intra-acting agencies; it is not an attribute of (human) subject or (non-human) object as they do not pre-exist as such separately. Consequently, human and non-human agencies are related to one another; humans are not only affecting the non-human world, but they affect each other in a very profound way. In this, the article contributes to the ongoing interrogation of human relations with non-human agency that is being actively conducted in contemporary Western scientific discourse. The concept of agency also allows participation in discussion about the current ecological crisis.

Keywords: agency; animal; dystopia; Marie Darrieussecq; human; non-human; *Truismes*

1. Introduction

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating (Barad 2007, Preface).

The above extract is part of the discussion in which the complex entanglements between human and non-human existence are powerfully brought forth in contemporary Western scientific discourse. This article studies contemporary French author Marie Darrieussecq's first novel, *Truismes*, which challenges the differential boundaries between the human and the non-human world. Darrieussecq's novel places itself within a contemporary French literary field that is argued to be *en péril* ("in danger") because it means nothing but "formalism, nihilism, and solipsism" (Todorov 2007). The Bulgarian-French literary critic Tzvetan Todorov argues that instead of being what literature is meant to be—discourse about the world—literature has turned into a discourse about literature (Id). Similarly, the French literature Professor Antoine Compagnon claims that contemporary French literature has gone through *un long suicide fastueux* ("a long luxurious suicide"), having been unable to deal with questions concerning the meaning of human existence in the contemporary world (Compagnon 2007). Another French critic, William Marx, proclaims that literature is only capable of talking about nothing and becoming a nothingness about which nothing more can be said (Marx 2005).

As the American feminist theorist Karen Barad reflects in general, “Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every ‘thing’—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation” (Barad 2007, p. 801). When it comes to the genre of dystopian fiction, one is more likely able to explore the connections between the speculative scenario and the actual condition of the real world, similar to the ways in which the American ecocritic Keira Hambrick argues in more general terms that environmental science fiction allows one to explore the possible outcomes of current ecological crisis (cf. Hambrick 2012, p. 130). Darrieussecq’s dystopian novel challenges one to understand that the ecological crisis is not *only* a narrative representation, as it deeply affects the world. That is to say, in encountering the environmental issues, such as the ways in which human activities have already had a significant global impact on earth’s biodiversity, ecosystems, and species extinction, that appear in Darrieussecq’s novel, one is more able to become aware of the ecological crisis. And then, “[R]eaders may be less likely to feel immobilized by fear and eco-anxiety, and may respond favourably to the call-for-action espoused by the narrator, characters, or the author” (Ibid., p. 135).

Truismes is, as argued, a dystopia, which literally in Greek means “not-good-place,” set in the future. To be more specific, Darrieussecq’s novel is based on classical dystopian fiction that portrays a human society of the future in which the agency of an individual or a group is restricted (Jacobs 2003, p. 92). However, *Truismes* is not only a classical *human* dystopia, as the novel centres on an animal. That is, *Truismes* is a story of a female protagonist whose body begins to turn into a sow. The heroine’s physical appearance is not all that changes; she undergoes many psychological and social changes as well. The heroine begins to change slowly from a beautiful young woman into a deformed hybrid, and then into a sow, but the metamorphosis is never completed. The heroine stays a “sow-woman,” which challenges the differential boundaries between human and non-human animal. It takes the heroine a long time to accept that she is a human *animal*. That is, the novel reflects the French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s critical thought about the ways in which humans have distinguished themselves from other animals (cf. Derrida 2006). The novel’s “animal question,” meaning the ways in which the text questions human supremacism, is important because of the insights it provides about speciesism, but the text also brings forth the ways in which the ontology of non-human animals needs to be rethought (Koponen 2017; Lestel 2015).

The “animal turn” is a significant part of contemporary French literature, as problematizing the dualistic opposition between human and non-human animal is the recurrent theme of several contemporary French authors, including Marie Darrieussecq (born 1969), Marie NDiaye (born 1967), and Antoine Volodine (born 1950). The novels of Darrieussecq, NDiaye, and Volodine are centred on life that can no longer be recognized separately as either human or animal (Turin 2012; Simon 2015). Their novels are related to a variety of contemporary theoretical approaches, such as Actor-Network theory (following Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law), affect theory (Silva Tomkins), agential realism (Karen Barad), animal studies, assemblage theory (Gilles Deleuze and Manuela DeLanda), cyborg theory (Donna Haraway), ecocriticism, ecofeminism, new materialism, Object-Oriented Ontology (Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, Graham Harman, and Timothy Morton), posthumanism, and transhumanism. Each of these approaches challenges the Cartesian dualism between (human) observer and (non-human) object of observation that still dominates Western metaphysics. For instance, Barad argues that “agency” is an entanglement of intra-acting agencies; agency is not an attribute of (human) subject or (non-human) object as they do not pre-exist such. Therefore, “We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are . . . part of the world in its differential becoming” (Barad 2007, p. 185). This means that any “becoming” is a process in which human and non-human agencies are entangled (Barad 2007; Morton 2010). As the American feminist theorist Donna Haraway argues, “To be one is always to become with many” (Haraway 2008, p. 4). In Haraway’s view, existence is always an entangled becoming, and there can be no pre-existence: “The partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on

a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters” (Id). For Haraway, “Respect is *respecere*—looking back, holding in regard, understanding that meeting the look of the other is a condition of having face oneself” (Id). As she adds, “[T]he point is not to celebrate complexity but to become worldly and to respond” (Id). Similarly, for the English philosopher Timothy Morton, “[E]xistence is always coexistence . . . Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully ‘itself’” (Morton 2010, pp. 14–15).

Darrieussecq’s novel reflects the ways in which dystopian fiction is often characterized by a dualistic framework that has long justified, maintained, and perpetuated the oppression of non-human nature—and that has also, in similar ways, justified, maintained, and perpetuated the oppression of marginalized groups, as the American philosopher Mark S. Roberts argues about the history of animalization of both humans and animals (cf. Roberts 2008). As the Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood puts it, “Dualism is a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalised in culture and characterised by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders constructed as systemically higher and lower” (Plumwood 1993, pp. 47–48). Dualism results from a denied dependency on a dominated other; the relationship of denied dependency determines a logical structure in which the relation of domination shape the identity of both relata (Ibid., p. 41). Dualism is, thus, more than just a dichotomy. Plumwood claims that, “In dualistic construction, as in hierarchy, the qualities (actual or supposed), the culture, the values and the areas of life associated with the dualised other are systematically and pervasively constructed and depicted as contingent and shifting” (Ibid., p. 47). In a dualistic framework, the socially constructed concept of *humanity* has been used as a means of exclusion; human specificity has been constructed in contrast to the animal, most significantly since the rise of Western modernity, which separated human from nature and made the animal an object (Lestel 2015; Parizeau 2015, p. 163; Vilmer 2015). The dualism between humans and animals denies the very idea of specificity, as it opposes a concrete species, *the human*, to a concept, *the animal*, thereby denying the diversity of all animal species (Baratay 2015, p. 5; Burgat 2015, p. 53). That is, thinking dualistically does not only affect our view on the human species; it affects our view on other animals as well.

Non-human nature has long been seen as having only instrumental value in relation to human needs. As Plumwood argues, “It [nature] is seen as non-agentic, as passive, non-creative and inert, with action being imposed from without by an external force. It is non-mindful, being mere stuff, mere matter, devoid of any characteristics of mind or thought. It lacks all goals and purposes of its own” (Plumwood 1993, p. 110). Plumwood maintains that what defines nature is human superiority that contrasts systemically with nature in one of its many dimensions. As he puts it, “Nature, as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason, includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilised, the non-human world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and madness” (Ibid., pp. 19–20). However, nature is one of the most complex words in the language (Williams 1985, p. 219). The Welsh academic, critic, and novelist Raymond Williams has argued that, “Any full history of the uses of nature would be a history of a large part of human thought” (Ibid., p. 221). In other words, defining nature depends on the historical context, in which the usage of the word reveals the complexity of human and non-human existence. For Williams, “nature” can refer to one of the following three definitions:

- (1) The essential quality and character of something;
- (2) The inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both;
- (3) The material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings (Ibid., p. 219).

The definitions above show that nature can be conceived of as both something that includes and does *not* include humans. I do, however, want to call into question that non-human nature could be in *any way* excluded from human reality. Morton criticizes even using the word “nature” arguing that “Nature was always ‘over yonder’, alien and alienated. Just like a reflection, we can never actually reach it and touch it and belong to it” (Morton 2013, p. 5). It seems clear that the awareness of the ecological crisis has completely changed the ways we think about nature. As Morton puts it, “You can

no longer have a routine conversation about the weather with a stranger. The presence of global warming looms into the conversation like a shadow, introducing strange gaps" (Ibid., p. 99). With this, Morton means that the notion of objects of such massive scale and temporality that they exceed the perceptive capacities of humans and of which global warming is his example, challenges us to think about human and non-human relations more broadly (Morton 2013).

The novel's dystopian trope manifests, following the words of the British ecocritic and professor Greg Garrard, "the extreme moral dualism that divides the world sharply into friend and enemy" (Garrard 2004, p. 86). In my view, however, Darrieussecq's novel, in which comic and tragic elements seem mixed, also calls into question the distinction between "us" and "them" or "victim" and "evil." According to American rhetorician Stephen O'Leary, the apocalyptic scenario may be either comic or tragic: "Tragedy conceives evil in term of guilt; its mechanism of redemption is victim, its plot moves inexorably towards sacrifice and 'the cult of kill.' Comedy conceives evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves not toward sacrifice but to the exposure of fallibility" (O'Leary 1994, p. 68). What is important is that Darrieussecq's novel implies that the "ecological thought" is often aestheticized, pastoralized, and simplified (cf. Morton 2010). As Morton argues, "Environmental rhetoric is too often strongly affirmative, extraverted, and masculine; it privileges speech over writing; and it simulates immediacy . . . It's sunny, straightforward, ableist, holistic, hearty, and 'healthy'" (Morton 2010, p. 16). Morton's concept of "dark ecology" brings "ambiguity", "darkness", and "irony" into ecological thinking (Id). Accordingly, the novel's "ecological thought" is not that of creating a false immediacy to the pristine nature, but that of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings (cf. Koponen 2017). This article asks how an understanding of the entangled intra-relation between humans and animals changes the anthropocentric notion of dystopia.

2. Living under the Threat of Humans

Darrieussecq has written several critical studies, short stories, plays, and novels in which a recurring theme is that of a heroine who cannot find her place in human society. *Truismes* is a story of a young female prostitute with a materialistic lifestyle who lives in a bomb-damaged, epidemic-ridden, and post-feminist Parisian-like city of the near future. There is a leading extreme right-wing party, Social-Franc-Progressisme, in the story. This party only allows a white man to lead the country. Their ideal of creating a homogeneous white nation means in practice that the defenders of human rights are locked in prison to "get rid of the rabble" (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 100). It also means that all immigrants can be deported without due process, that the homeless and homosexuals can be brutally slaughtered, and that mental hospitals are burned down with people inside. In this kind of dystopian reality, non-human nature has only capitalistic value in relation to human needs, which has caused a large-scale ecological crisis. Darrieussecq's novel has also been conceived of as a dystopian satire of the 1990s rise of the French national party Front National (FN) (cf. Muirden 2008). Here, the novel ironizes the extreme ring-wing political forces, such as the Front National and its founding leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who has been criticized for his anti-Semitic speeches. Incidentally, since Le Pen's daughter Marine Le Pen's election as the leader of the FN in 2011, the popularity of the anti-immigrant party has grown.

In Darrieussecq's dystopian novel, the lack of an individual's agency is explained in terms of oppressive societal control, as the English professor Naomi Jacobs claims, "The citizens of dystopia are gripped in a social formation so powerful, a web of control so densely woven, that at worst they do not even know they are not free" (Jacobs 2003, p. 92). To begin with, the story begins when the female protagonist sends a job application to a massive cosmetic chain. When she manages to get an interview, the chain's director sits her on his lap and paws at her breast, and she needs to give oral sex for receiving the minimum wage for a part time employment, which turns out to be prostitution. Yet, there is irony, since the heroine delights in getting the job with low benefits: "[E]t dans le contrat il était précisé qu'au moment du déstockage annuel, j'aurais droit à des produits de beauté, les plus

grandes marques deviendraient à ma portée, les parfumes les plus chers!” (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 13). [“And the contract specifically said that during the annual inventory clearance, I would be entitled to some cosmetics. I’d have a chance at getting the most famous brands, the most expensive perfumes!” (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 3)]. The female narrator’s use of the exclamation point indicates her strong enthusiasm to get the job.

The heroine does not have any difficulties with post-feminist values, such as enjoying herself while working as a sex worker: “Ce n’était pas un mauvais métier. Il y avait quand même satisfactions” (Darrieussecq 1996, pp. 33–34). [“It wasn’t a bad line of work. There were some satisfactions, after all” (Darrieussecq 1997, pp. 22–23)]. At the same time, she could just as easily stay at home as a housewife: “Sans doute que le mieux pour les jeunes filles de maintenant, je me permets d’énoncer cet avis après tout ce que j’ai vécu, c’est de trouver un bon mari, qui ne boit pas, parce que la vie est dure et une femme ça ne travaille pas comme un homme, et puis ce n’est pas les hommes qui vont s’occuper des enfants, et tous les gouvernements le disent, il n’y pas assez d’enfants” (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 66). [“What is doubtless best for girls of today, and I venture this opinion on the strength of my extensive experience, is to find a good husband, a teetotaler, because life is hard and a woman doesn’t work like a man, and you can’t expect men to look after the children, and there aren’t enough children, every government says so” (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 52)]. The heroine’s naïve voice reflects the ways in which the feminist ideology from earlier generations has disappeared. As the French critic Shirley Jordan puts it, “Darrieussecq . . . appears to indicate that bodies of feminist knowledge have not percolated down to ordinary women: it is as if they were an irrelevance of history” (Jordan 2002, p. 146). In the words of the British cultural theorist Angela McRobbie, Darrieussecq’s novel creates a “new form of sexual contract,” which makes the heroine think that as gender equality is already once achieved and institutionalized, feminism is no longer needed (McRobbie 2009, pp. 3–8). The heroine seems to think that she has truly chosen “a life of her own” (Id). As McRobbie clarifies it, “[Y]oung women are endowed with capacity and are as a result expected to pursue specific life pathways which require participation in the workforce, which in turn permits full immersion in consumer culture” (McRobbie 2009, p. 9). That is, for the heroine, there is nothing remotely naïve about working as a sex worker, as she seems to be doing it for her own enjoyment.

However, working as a prostitute turns the heroine into an animalized object that does not hold any right to her own body: “Le directeur de la chaîne me disait que dans la parfumerie, l’essentiel est d’être toujours belle et soignée, et que j’apprécierais sans doute très étroite des blouses de travail, que cela m’irait très bien” (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 11). [“The director told me that in the boutique the most important thing was to look lovely and well groomed at all times. He was sure I would approve of the employees’ uniforms, which were tight fitting and would look quite attractive on me” (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 3)]. The scene points at the ways in which the normalization of pornographized culture makes the heroine try to fit an ideal of what a woman should look like by taking responsibility for her metamorphic body: “Je subtilisais les crèmes conseillées par les magazines et je les étais soigneusement sur ma peau, mais rien n’y faisait. J’étais toujours aussi fatiguée . . . En plus de développer une profonde graisse sous-cutanée ma peau devenait allergique à tout, même aux produits les plus chers” (Darrieussecq 1996, pp. 47–48). [“I swiped the products recommended by the magazines and smoothed creams carefully onto my skin, but nothing helped. I was just as fatigued . . . Besides developing a thick layer of subcutaneous fat, my skin was becoming allergic to everything, even the most expensive preparation” (Darrieussecq 1997, pp. 35–36)]. What is relevant here is that the heroine becomes allergic to beauty products at the same time as she starts having an animal-like appearance. These lines invoke the context of animal testing and the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s famous guideline for animal ethics, that is, “The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” (Bentham in Vilmer 2015, p. viii). Yet despite her suffering, the heroine is an active subject that has a strong will to shape her body to human ideals of perfection, following the American feminists Susan Bordo and Naomi Wolf and their critical thought concerning the impact of popular culture (cf. Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991). The heroine’s constant self-monitoring practices, such as her will

to stare at her own reflection in the mirror, reveal the ways in which she starts to look at herself being looked at, which evokes the English author, critic, and painter John Berger's criticism of the ways in which women are portrayed in visual images (cf. Berger 1990). The heroine's "hetero-narcissistic" erotic mirroring, a mirroring of the self as other, turns the heroine into an object of vision (Freccero 2015, p. 114). The sow-woman continuously looks at herself as a material being, which constitutes, as I see it, a critical comment on animals as machines without a conscious mind (Sahlms 2015, pp. 22, 24).

The director is not the only one who pays attention to the heroine's body; the novel's recurring motif is that of men ogling the heroine's "appetizing" body, which reveals the ways in which men are constantly oppressing the heroine: "Il fallait toujours qu'on se mette à quatre pattes devant la glace, et qu'on pousse des cris d'animaux. Les hommes sont tout de même étranges" (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 44). ["We always had to get down on all fours in front of the mirror and make animal noises. Men are really strange" (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 32)]. The extract implies that the novel's metaphorical trope is describing women as animal-like. In other words, the female protagonist who becomes a sow is seen from the beginning as an animalized other in a strongly patriarchal society, in which it is nothing but a post-feminist platitude—or a *truism*—that a young woman possesses value only in an instrumental sense. The novel reveals the ways in which a process of "objectification, fragmentation, and consumption" enables the oppression of both animals and women so that they are rendered being-less in a strongly patriarchal society. As the American animal rights activist and feminist Carol J. Adams puts it, "Objectification permits an oppressor to view another being as an object. The oppressor then violates this being by object-like treatment: e.g., the rape of women that denies women freedom to say no, or the butchering of animals that converts animals from living breathing being into dead objects. This process allows fragmentation, or brutal dismemberment, and finally consumption" (Adams 1990, p. 73). By way of clarification, Adams says, "Consumption is the fulfillment of oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity. So too with language: a subject first is viewed, or objectified, through metaphor. Through fragmentation the object is severed from its ontological meaning. Finally, consumed, it exists only through what it represents" (Id). The novel's name has, thus, an interesting onomatopoeic reference to two French words that are pronounced in almost the same way: *truism* and *truie*, a word that means a "sow"—a term of female abuse in many cultures (cf. Muirden 2008, p. 230).

In the novel's dystopian reality, the heroine is in many ways being animalized, but she also becomes a *real* animal. It is clearly not a coincidence that the heroine starts losing her appetite for pork in the process of becoming-animal: "Je ne pouvais plus manger de sandwich au jambon, cela me donnait des nausées, une fois même j'avais vomi au square" (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 21). ["I couldn't eat ham sandwiches any more, they made me sick, and once I even threw up in the park" (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 11)]. She even starts having anxiety attacks about pork: "Eh bien quand j'ai vu les rillettes je n'ai pas pu me retenir une seconde: j'ai vomi là, dans la cuisine . . . De toute la soirée je n'ai pas pu me calmer. Je tremblais, j'avais des sueurs froides qui empestaient dans tout l'appartement" (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 53). ["Well when I saw the potted pork, I just threw up then and there, in the kitchen . . . I was a nervous wreck for the rest of the evening. I was shaking, and the entire apartment reeked from my cold sweats" (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 40)]. One interesting feature of Darrieussecq's novel is that the motif of pork is present in the heroine's life throughout the story. For instance, the sow-woman is forced to confront an animal slaughtering in finding a book passage in which a boar realizes his own death:

C'était un livre de Knut Hamsun ou quelque chose . . . Ça me paraissait bien, à moi, comme livre, mais il y a une phrase qui m'a fait tout bizarre, ça disait, je m'en souviens encore par cœur: « Puis le couteau s'enfoncé. Le valet lui donne deux petites poussées pour lui faire traverser la couenne, après quoi, c'est comme si la longue lame fondait en s'enfonçant jusqu'au manche à travers la graisse du cou. D'abord le verrat ne se rend compte de rien, il reste allongé quelques secondes à réfléchir un peu. Si! Il comprend alors qu'on le tue et hurle en cris étouffés jusqu'à ce qu'il n'en puisse plus. » Je me suis demandé ce que c'était qu'un verrat, ça m'a mis

comme une mauvaise sueur dans le dos. J'ai préféré en rire, parce que sinon j'allais vomir (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 105).

It was a book by Knut Hamsun or whoever . . . Personally, I thought it was a nice book, but there was one passage that made me feel sort of shaky, it said (I still remember it by heart): "Then the knife plunges in. The farmhand gives it two little shoves to push it through the thick skin, after which the long blade seems to melt through the neck fat as it sinks in up to the hilt. At first the boar doesn't understand a thing, he remains stretched out for the a few seconds, thinking about it. Aha! Then he realizes he is being killed and utters strangled cries until he can scream no more." I wondered what a boar was; my back was beginning to feel all clammy. I decided to laugh it off, because otherwise I was going to throw up (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 87).

Hamsun's book makes the sow-woman realize that there is no difference between utilizing an animal product and having to confront the dead animal itself. The heroine then attempts to avoid eating meat that reminds her of her own transformation from a *living* animal to *dead* meat. However, the heroine's boyfriend, Honoré, is trying to maintain control over the metamorphic heroine by forcing her to eat pork: "J'ai failli me trouver mal quand Honoré a absolument voulu me faire goûter son pécarri à l'ananas, mais j'ai réussi à prendre sur moi" (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 59). ["I thought I was going to be sick when Honoré insisted that I taste his peccary à l'ananas, but I managed to control myself" (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 48)]. For the heroine, the meat is the moment "when what remained hidden to us is opened up" (Broglie 2011, pp. 1–2). As the American philosopher Ron Broglie clarifies, "The animal's insides become outsides. Its depth of form becomes a surface, and its depth of being becomes the thin lifelessness of an object exposed. Meat makes the animal insides visible, and through sight the animal body becomes knowable" (Id). Consequently, pork refers to a corporeal breakdown in the distinction between what is the *self* and what is the *other*, following the Bulgarian-French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva's thought about the human reaction to anxiety caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object (cf. Koponen 2017; Kristeva 1980). I argue that in the process of becoming-animal, the heroine confronts what has always been there, which is to say, she discovers that she is a human *animal*.

And yet, the heroine realizes that she needs to act if she wants to avoid her own death as an animal. To clarify, the sow-woman's mother, who has become a wealthy farmer engaged in raising pigs and other livestock for food, wants to make extra money by killing her daughter: "Ma mère tenait un grand couteau à la main, une bassine en cuivre pour le sang, et du papier journal pour faire brûler la couenne. 'Là au fond', elle a dit ma mère. Elle a posé la bassine et le papier journal . . . Ma mère en plus d'être un assassin était une voleuse, elle allait tuer un cochon qui ne lui appartenait" (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 156). ["My mother was holding a large knife, a copper basin to catch the blood, and some newspaper for singeing the skin. 'Over there, in the back,' she said. She put down the basin and the newspaper . . . Besides being a murderer, my mother was a thief; she was going to a pig that didn't belong to her" (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 134)]. The mother's determinate action makes the previous encounters with animal slaughter personal, which becomes even stronger when the heroine finds out that her mother has a relationship with her former exploiting employer from the cosmetic chain. The mother's threat is the last straw for the sow-woman, who, after being suddenly transformed more into a human-like form, shoots first her former employer and then her own mother: "[J]e le lui ai arraché des mains. J'ai tiré deux fois, la première fois sur lui, la seconde fois sur ma mère" (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 157). ["I tore the gun from his shaking hands. I fired twice: first at him, then at my mother" (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 134)]. The tragicomic scene raises questions about an animal's agency by pointing at the ways in which animals are realized as lacking the rational capacity to act outside their biologically determined behaviour (cf. Koponen 2017). That is, animals may not act like humans, but that is not to be conceived of as a loss of agency.

3. Looking for Better Place to Live

The metamorphic heroine is going through a crisis of identity, which reflects Julia Kristeva's notion of the *sujet en procès*, which means both the "subject-in-process" and the "subject-on-trial" (Kristeva 2008). Kristeva makes a reference to the speaking subject that does not have a fixed identity but is in the process of *becoming*. One interesting feature of Darrieussecq's writing is that she uses a female narrator who writes her own story. In this, Darrieussecq makes her female narrator relate to the French literary tradition of *écriture féminine* ("feminine writing"). Here, she follows the theorizations of the Algerian-French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous, for whom this concept refers to a way of feminine expression which is capable of resisting the history of *phallogocentric* discourse, that women have, in short, been denied access to the agency within the possibility of self-representation. Therefore, in Cixous' view, "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into history—by her own movement" (Cixous 2010, p. 875). In writing in the tradition of *écriture féminine*, Darrieussecq is liberating her female narrators from phallogocentric discourse, enabling them to take agency in the process of constructing their identity.

In *Truismes*, Darrieussecq gives her female protagonist the chance to narrate her self-written story in her own voice. And yet, she calls into question the human way of perceiving the world by using the animal's voice: "Mais il faut que j'écrive ce livre sans plus tarder, parce que si on me retrouve dans l'état où je suis maintenant, personne ne voudra ni m'écouter ni me croire. Or tenir un stylo me donne de terribles crampes" (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 9). ["But I must write this book without further delay, because if they find me in my present state, no one will listen to me or believe what I say. Simply holding a pen gives me terrible cramps" (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 1)]. The metamorphosis allows the heroine to create new ways of expression. I see this represented in the heroine's relationship with language. In the process of becoming-animal, the sow-woman finds a contact with the mental hospital patients: "Je suis devenue copine avec pas mal de monde. Personne ne parlait là-dedans, tout le monde criait, chantait, bavait, mangeait à quatre pattes et ce genre de choses. On s'amusaient bien" (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 101). ["I became chummy with lots of people. No one talked in there, they all screamed, sang, drooled, ate on all fours and that kind of thing" (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 83)]. The scene implies that the sow-woman is excluded from the human sphere on the grounds of lacking rational thinking. The heroine's lack of speaking skills constitutes, to my thinking, the ways in which she is not integrated into human life because she is not able to indicate to humans by a voice referring to human thought (Roberts 2008, p. 9). And yet, the scene questions the ways in which marginalized groups, such as mentally disabled people, have been animalized and stripped of their agency because they do not operate according to the laws of the dominant phallogocentric order, in accordance with the ways in which Roberts describes the process of animalization (cf. Roberts 2008). The heroine's lack of human language brings also forth the *muteness* of nature, which refers to the nature's inability to speak for itself via human language, similar to the German essayist, critic, and philosopher Walter Benjamin's claim that, "[N]aming implies the communicating muteness of things (animals) toward the word-language of man, which receives them in names" (cf. Benjamin 1996, p. 70). The novel suggests that the fact that animals do not speak, at least in the sense that humans understand language, is not to be conceived of as a loss of agency, but rather as a condition that indicates another mode of existence (Burgat 2015, p. 54).

The heroine's muteness is in service to the portrayal of a dystopian world in which she lacks the capacity to question the ways in which humans have established the means of consuming nature to the point of depletion. As the French philosopher Michel Serres states, "Through our mastery, we have become so much and so little masters of the Earth that it once again threatens to master us in turn. Through it, with it, and in it, we share one temporal destiny" (Serres 1995, pp. 33–34). In the novel's dystopian reality, human acting over non-human nature is recognized as the problematic that the heroine needs to confront, as almost all animal life is destroyed: "Où avez-vous bien pu trouver

un cochon par les temps qui courent?” (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 116). [“Where did you get a pig in this day and age?” (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 97)]. The passage implies that the sow-woman belongs to a species categorized as endangered, if not extinct. In this, the novel challenges the vision of continuing human progress.

As the metamorphosis proceeds, the heroine regains her speaking skills every now and then: “Je pouvais articuler à nouveau, c’était sans doute d’avoir lu tous ces mots dans les livres, ça m’avait fait comme qui dirait un entraînement” (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 105). [“I could speak again, probably from having read all those words in those books, so you might say I’d had some practice” (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 87)]. In what follows, the heroine starts to express herself with a voice that reflects the American literary critic and professor Barbara Claire Freeman’s notion of the “feminine sublime”, which resists categorization. This is a condition in which the subject enters in a relation with an unrepresentable otherness that, almost without exception, is gendered feminine (Freeman 1995, pp. 2–3). As Freeman clarifies it, “The feminine sublime is not a discursive strategy, technique, or literary style the female writer invests, but rather a crisis in relation to language and representation that a certain subject undergoes” (Ibid., p. 2). For Freeman, the feminine sublime makes a reference to the categorical instability of a socially constructed body of writing that bears the traces of women’s shared history of oppression (Ibid., p. 7).

The heroine’s sublime voice involves taking up a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness (Freeman 1995, p. 11). The heroine begins to realize that the non-human world is inseparable from her own being: “[L]’air, les oiseaux, je ne sais pas, ce qui restait de la nature ça me faisait tout à coup quelque chose” (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 19). [“The air, the birds—I don’t know, whatever nature was left—really affected me all of a sudden” (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 10)]. The sow-woman’s focus of attention reveals changes in her perception of the environment: “Je discernais de plus en plus en mal les fumées d’Issy, les couleurs de brouillaient. Tout ce que je voyais maintenant c’était le fond très rouge du ciel, et tout le reste était en ombres noires et blanches” (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 75). [“Over by Issy, it was growing harder to make out the factory smoke, the colours were running together. All I could see now was the vivid red background of the sky, while everything else was light and dark shadows” (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 60)]. In becoming an animal, the sow-woman’s panoramic vision starts to increase, and gradually the limits of the city become blurred, which turn her attention toward the immense sky. That is, she is discovering, in a tangible way, that she has come into contact with a newly perceived environment in which she needs to find her place anew.

The heroine begins to feel “a violent, terrifying, delicious sense of solitude” over the dystopian city: “Il n’y avait plus rien qui me retenait dans la ville avec les gens” (Darrieussecq 1996, pp. 84–85). [“There was no longer anything to keep me in the city, among people” (Darrieussecq 1997, pp. 68–69)]. The novel’s turning point is the moment when the sow-woman begins to imagine the future: “Moi le bout des rails, ça me faisait rêver. Je me suis assise au bord de la voie et j’ai essayé de réfléchir à mon avenir . . . [J]e me mettrais à marcher le long des rails, parce qu’au bout il y avait forcément la campagne et des arbres” (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 100). [“Well, looking down the tracks always started me dreaming. I sat down at the edge of the roadbed and tried to think about my future . . . I’d set out walking along the tracks, because there had to be trees and countryside at the end of the line” (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 82)]. The sow-woman is concerned with the future. She begins to expect that the current paradigm may be at an end, but what is important is that the heroine relies upon her will to survive within a new paradigm (cf. Seed 2000, p. 2).

For the heroine, identifying with the other animals allows her to escape the dystopian condition of the world: “Je me suis roulée dans mon odeur pour me tenir compagnie. Les oiseaux se sont tus. J’ai senti la nuit tomber sur ma peau. J’ai glissé du banc et j’ai dormi là, par terre, jusqu’à l’aube. Il y avait les rêves des oiseaux dans mes rêves, et le rêve que le chien avait laissé pour moi. Je n’étais pas si seule. Je ne rêvais plus de sang. Je rêvais de fougères et de terre humide. Mon corps me tenait chaud. J’étais bien” (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 85). [“I curled up in my smell to keep myself company. The birds fell silent. I slipped off the bench and slept there, on the ground, until dawn. In my dreams were

the dreams of the birds, and the dreams the dog had left for me. I was no longer so alone. I didn't dream about blood any more. I dreamed of ferns and damp earth. My body kept me warm. I was just fine" (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 69)]. The heroine's focus remains no more in her own physical appearance; the sow-woman starts to identify with the non-human world, which makes her adjust her orientation toward an ecocentric perspective. The sow-woman begins to enjoy herself within *wild* nature, which here refers to what seems to be free from human activity (Freeman 1995, p. 155). This becomes apparent in the passage below:

Je ne suis pas mécontente de mon sort. La nourriture est bonne, la clairière confortable, les marcassins m'amuse. Je me laisse souvent aller. Rien n'est meilleur que la terre chaude autour de soi quand on s'éveille le matin, l'odeur de son propre corps mélangée à l'odeur de l'humus, les premières bouchées que l'on prend sans même se lever, glands, châtaignes tout ce qui a roulé dans la bauge sous les coups de patte des rêves (Darrieussecq 1996, p. 148).

I'm not unhappy with my lot. The food's good, the clearing comfortable, the young wild boars are entertaining. I often relax and enjoy myself. There's nothing better than warm earth around you when you wake up in the morning, the smell of your own body mingling with the odour of humus, the first mouthfuls you take without even getting up, gobbling acorns, chestnuts, everything that has rolled down into the wallow while you were scrabbling in your dreams (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 135).

The sow-woman moves on from thinking of herself as being part of the wild nature to enjoying her life within the cityscape (cf. Koponen 2017). Consequently, the sow-woman is not truly able to find her place among other species: "Même dans la forêt avec les autres cochons, ils me reniflent souvent avec défiance, ils sentent bien que ça continue à penser comme les hommes là-dedans. Je ne suis pas à la hauteur de leurs attentes. Je ne me plie pas assez au travail de la race, et pourtant c'est moi qui les ai débarrassés du principal péril qui les guettait" (Darrieussecq 1996, pp. 150–51). ["Even when I'm in the forest with the other pigs, they often sniff me suspiciously, sensing that human thoughts are still going on in there. I'm unable to rise to their expectations. I don't conform enough to porcine discipline, yet I'm the one who routed the chief danger that threatened them" (Darrieussecq 1997, p. 128)]. For the heroine, the other pigs are not other animals but "strange stranger." Morton defines the notion in respect to animals as follows: "This stranger isn't just strange . . . Their strangeness itself is strange. We can never absolutely figure them out. If we could, then all we would have is a ready-made box to put them in, and we could just be looking at the box, not at the strange strangers. They are intrinsically strange. Do we know for sure whether they are sentient or not? Their strangeness is part of who they are" (Morton 2010, p. 41). The heroine's wonderings reveal the ways in which other species are always *strange*, due to the fact that humans are not capable of completely reaching their inner being. That is, the novel calls into question the ideal of *going back to nature*, as there is no nature in which all humans or non-humans are not already engulfed.

4. Conclusions

Truismes is the most famous early novel of Marie Darrieussecq and was written in 1996. Through the novel, Darrieussecq depicts a dystopian vision of the world. Various dystopian elements, such as an extreme racism, sexism, and speciesism, are portrayed throughout the novel. In the novel's dystopian reality, non-human nature has only capitalistic value in relation to human needs, which has caused a large-scale ecological crisis. The dystopian background of the novel brings to mind the ways in which a dystopian fiction is often seen as a warning of human development in its many forms (Isomaa 2016). Bearing in mind the fact that humans have modified the Earth more in the past fifty years than the two centuries before that, this is clearly not an exaggeration (Delannoy 2015, p. 139). The idea of the "Anthropocene," a proposed geologic epoch, reveals the ways in which human activities have already had a significant global impact on Earth's biodiversity, ecosystems, and species extinction (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). It can no longer be bypassed that

anthropocentric thinking, which implies a privileged separation of humans from non-human reality, has become highly problematic.

In Darrieussecq's dystopian novel, the ecological catastrophe is represented as something that has already happened, rather than as something in the future. The novel reveals the ways in which the heroine's agency is threatened by both the actions of other humans and by the large-scale ecological crisis. That is, humans affecting the non-human world and affect each other in a very profound way. In this, my reading of the novel is an attempt to contribute to the ongoing interrogation of human relations with non-human agency that is being actively conducted in contemporary scientific Western discourse. What is relevant is that Darrieussecq's novel gives the sow-woman the chance to narrate her self-written story in her own voice. By giving a narrative voice to the animal, the novel challenges the human reader to reflect on the transformation of anthropocentric orientation toward nature itself. And yet, the novel challenges the human reader to understand that the ecological crisis is not only a narrative representation, as it deeply affects the real world; the non-human world is not only the landscape surrounding humans, but that it is *in* humans, because humans and non-humans are all connected.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the journal's editorial staff for their careful reading of my manuscript and for giving useful comments.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Adams, Carol J. 1990. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. New York: Continuum.
- Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press, London: Duke University Press.
- Baratay, Éric. 2015. Building an Animal History. In *French Thinking about Animals*. Edited by Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus. Translated by Stephanie Posthumus. Lansing: Michigan State University Press, pp. 3–14.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1996. On Language as Such and on the Language of Man. In *Selected Writings Volume 1 1913–1926*. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 62–74.
- Berger, John. 1990. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books.
- Bordo, Susan. 1993. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Broglio, Ron. 2011. *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Burgat, Florence. 2015. The Unexpected Resemblance between Dualism and Continuism, or How to Break a Philosophical Stalemate. In *French Thinking about Animals*. Edited by Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus. Translated by Dantzel Cenatiempo. Lansing: Michigan State University Press, pp. 49–59.
- Cixous, Hélène. 2010. *La Rire de la Médusa*. Paris: Galilée, First published 1975.
- Compagnon, Antoine. 2007. *La Littérature, Pour Quoi Faire?* Paris: Collège de France; Paris: Fayard.
- Crutzen, Paul, and Eugene Stoermer. 2000. The 'Anthropocene'. *Global Change Newsletter* 41: 17–18.
- Darrieussecq, Marie. 1996. *Truismes*. Paris: P.O.L. Éditeur.
- Darrieussecq, Marie. 1997. *Pig Tales*. Translated by Linda Coverdale. London: Faber & Faber.
- Delannoy, Isabelle. 2015. On Being Living Beings. In *French Thinking about Animals*. Edited by Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus. Translated by Mariève Isabel. Lansing: Michigan State University Press, pp. 135–48.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2006. *L'animal que Donc je Suis*. Paris: Éditions Galilée.
- Freccero, Carla. 2015. Chercher la chatte: Derrida's Queer Feminine Animality. In *French Thinking about Animals*. Edited by Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus. Lansing: Michigan State University Press, pp. 105–20.
- Freeman, Barbara Claire. 1995. *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excesses in Women's Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Garrard, Greg. 2004. *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge.

- Hambrick, Keira. 2012. Destroying Imagination to Save Reality: Environmental Apocalypse in Science Fiction. In *Environmentalism in the Realm of Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature*. Edited by Chris Baratta. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 129–42.
- Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Isomaa, Saija. 2016. Dystopia as a Warning? Narrative Empathy, Collective Values and genre Competence in Interpreting Dystopian Fiction. Paper presented at the Conference of Cognitive Futures in the Humanities, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland, June 13–15.
- Jacobs, Naomi. 2003. Posthuman Bodies and Agency in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*. In *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Edited by Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini. New York: Routledge, pp. 91–111.
- Jordan, Shirley Ann. 2002. Saying the unsayable: Identities in crisis in the early novels of Marie Darrieussecq. In *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*. Edited by Gill Rye and Michael Worton. Manchester: Manchester University Press, New York: Manchester University Press, pp. 142–53.
- Koponen, Päivi. 2017. Naiseläimen toimijuus Marie Darrieussecqin romaanissa *Sikatotta*. *Sukupuolentutkimus-Genusforskning* 2: 7–19.
- Kristeva, Julia. 2008. *Polylogue*. Paris: Seuil, First published 1977.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1980. *Pouvoirs de L'horreur*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Lestel, Dominique. 2015. Like the Fingers of the Hand: Thinking the Human in the Texture of Animality. In *French Thinking about Animals*. Edited by Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus. Translated by Matthew Chrulew, and Jeffrey Bussolini. Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Marx, William. 2005. *L'Adieu à la littérature. Histoire d'une Dévalorisation, XVIIIe-XXe Siècle*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuits.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Morton, Timothy. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, London: Harvard University Press.
- Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Muirden, Sallie. 2008. Magical Allegory in Marie Darrieussecq's novel *Pig Tales* (1996): Piggy Debauchery in Postcolonial France. *Colloquy: Text Theory Critic* 16: 229–44.
- O'Leary, Stephen. 1994. *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parizeau, Marie-Hélène. 2015. Wild, Domestic, or Technical: What Status for Animals? In *French Thinking about Animals*. Edited by Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus. Translated by Stephanie Posthumus. Lansing: Michigan State University Press, pp. 163–77.
- Plumwood, Val. 1993. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Roberts, Mark S. 2008. *The Mark of the Beast: Animality and Human Oppression*. Indiana: Purdue University Press.
- Sahlms, Peter. 2015. A Tale of Three Chameleons: The Animal between Science and Literature in the Age of Louis XIV. In *French Thinking about Animals*. Edited by Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus. Lansing: Michigan State University Press, pp. 15–30.
- Seed, David. 2000. *Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis*. London: Macmillan.
- Serres, Michel. 1995. *The Natural Contract*. Translated by Elizabeth McArthur, and William Paulson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Simon, Anne. 2015. Animality and Contemporary French Literary Studies. In *French Thinking about Animals*. Edited by Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus. Translated by Céline Maillard, and Stephanie Posthumus. Lansing: Michigan State University Press, pp. 75–88.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 2007. *La Littérature en Péril*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Turin, Gaspard. 2012. La métamorphose littéraire comme téléologie négative. Le cas de Marie Ndiaye et d'Antoine Volodine. In *Hybrides et Monstres: Transgressions et Promesses des Cultures Contemporaines*. Edited by Lucile Desblache. Dijon: Éditions universitaires de Dijon, pp. 181–90.

Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste Jeangéne. 2015. Foreword. In *French Thinking about Animals*. Edited by Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus. Translated by Stephanie Posthumus. Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Williams, Raymond. 1985. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wolf, Naomi. 1991. *The Beauty Myth. How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*. London: Vintage Book.



© 2017 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).