On a Serpentine Note

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Taking its starting point from Jacques Derrida’s statement in “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” where he affirms that only poetic thinking can truly host the question of the animal (what he coins in French by the untranslatable and idiomatic “animot”), this paper looks into the reconfiguration given by Jacques Derrida to this major theme of the animal and to an animal-like signature. It takes this “reconfiguration” in all senses, and also literally, at its word: first, by a swift survey of some of Derrida’s most crucial theoretical propositions regarding the limit between man and the animal; second, by investigating and presenting the full extent of the Derridean inquiry as it reproblematises everything we think we know about the animal in the figure – if it still responds to this name – of the animetaphor of the silkworm, in the primitive and infinite writing scene closing “A Silkworm of One’s Own”; and last but not least, this serpentine note is followed or traced through one of Derrida’s latest texts, his Seminar, La bête et le souverain, where, in an improvised and most moving session, he comments on D.H. Lawrence’s poem, Snake.

With its whole gaze
   a creature
      looks out at the open.
But our eyes
   are as though turned in
      and they seem to set traps
all around it
   as if to prevent
      its going free.
We can only know
   what is out there
      from an animal’s features
for we make even infants
   turn and look back
      at the way things are shaped
not toward the open
   that lies so deep
      in an animal’s face.

Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies¹
Neither gods nor animals, men say of themselves today,
self-satisfied,
When in truth they should be pitied for having come to lose
so easily god in the animal and the animal in god
and in themselves one and the other.

Jean-Christophe Bailly, “Singes.”

“The animal looks at us (nous regarde), and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there” (The Animal 29). Through these powerful statements, Jacques Derrida enjoins us to reconsider everything we think we know. Among the most remarkable features of his reconfiguration of this major theme of the animal (not only the animal but, more importantly, animality and the many and varied limits between it and humanity, “humanimality” to borrow Michel Surya’s term – but perhaps Derrida would have felt slightly reticent about this figure that, while keeping the human and the animal inseparable, insists on preserving the priority of precisely this “human” it brings into question…) – three crucial propositions retain our attention. The first one relates to pity, to the animal’s suffering and therefore to affect, a devalued or repressed element that Derrida places at the heart of his reflection, recognizing it as the very condition for examining these relations: suffering, then, contrary to speech or reason, which philosophers have always considered man’s exclusive peculiarity – or rather, his privilege, his power, his sovereign prerogative. That which is proper to man – never-closed list of predicates, drawing attention to its indeterminate nature, its fragility to establish unshakable foundations, be it just one – a series of properties that are supposed to differentiate man from animals, starting with language, logos, history, laughter, ritualization, burial, the gift, “dressing oneself,” modesty (“From that point on, naked without knowing it, animals would not be, in truth, naked” [The Animal 5]): without the knowledge of their nudity, they would not be (self)conscious and fit to distinguish between good and evil. Therefore, Derrida reformulates everything based on Jeremy Bentham’s question, “Can they suffer?,” this question of suffering and pity displacing all head-on opposition between “man” and “animal,” the latter having always been relegated to the other side of the limit as a single, homogeneous category, “the Animal in general, the Animal spoken of in the general singular” (40), “in spite of the infinite space,” writes Derrida, “that separates the lizard from the dog, the protozoon from the dolphin, the shark from the lamb, the parrot from the chimpanzee, the camel from the eagle, the squirrel from the tiger or the elephant from the cat, the ant from the silkworm or the hedgehog from the echidna” (34).

The second question also concerns the limit, but more specifically this time the line that man himself draws. “The ‘question of animality,’” Derrida