

# Zo(o)graphies: Darwinian ‘Evolutions’ of a Fictional Bestiary<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The essay puts to the test Darwinian evolutionist theories, especially the key concepts of adaptation, natural selection and survival of the fittest, in the reading of several plots and fictions (some of them Ark-related animal fictions) concerned with evolution, trauma, adaptability, mimicry/mimesis and survival: Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, Timothy Findley’s *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Robert Kroetsch’s *The Studhorse Man* and John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. Weaving its critical argument with reference to several of Derrida’s reflections – on the impossibility of a pure origin, the proximity between commencement and commandment, the logic of obsequence, or relation between being and following (*je suis*), applied deconstructively to the traditional hierarchy between the human and the animal, mastery and monstrosity, and logos and *bêtise*, etc. – ‘Zo(o)graphies’ is structured in a series of interlinked tableaux, bestiaries as well as insets (Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Jacques Derrida’s *Glas*). Following from the opening evocation of Peter Greenaway’s Vermeer-themed film *A Zed & Two Noughts*, which introduces the joint semantics of *zographie*: to paint from life, and *zoon*: animal, discreetly at work throughout, this study will eventually attempt to recast the problematic of the evolution of literature and literary forms as involution and regression.

**Keywords:** *zo(o)graphy, bestiary, monster/master, mimesis/mimicry, evolution/involution, Darwinism, Julian Barnes, Gustave Flaubert, Timothy Findley, Robert Kroetsch, John Fowles, Jacques Derrida*

## 0(0)pening Tableau

*Z followed by one or two zeroes, end of the end (z, omega) or followed by the cyclical return to the origin: zoographies, writings of the animal / animal writings or, in Greek, zographie: to paint from life or from a live model. Or else Zoo / A Zed & Two Noughts, Peter Greenaway’s 1985 film whose referential backdrop is a set of twenty-six paintings by Johannes Vermeer, the Dutch artist known for his passion for mirror and window reflections, his analytic experiments with light – which are so many mises en abyme of pictorial art reflecting (on) its ability to represent in a film full of framings and visual frames, mirror images and fearful symmetries – and whose technique of applying diffuse splashes of colour on objects to enhance them was supposedly influenced by the work of*

<sup>1</sup> The following is a revised and corrected version-in-translation of the inaugural keynote lecture delivered at the *décade* (10-day symposium) at Cerisy-la-Salle on ‘L’animal autobiographique. Autour du travail de Jacques Derrida’ (11-21 July 1997), which was subsequently reworked for publication in the conference proceedings volume. See Laurent Milesi, ‘Zo(o)graphies: “Évolutions” darwiniennes de quelques fictions animales’, in *L’Animal autobiographique. Autour de Jacques Derrida*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 1999), 9-46.

*Dutch naturalist (and ‘Father of Microbiology’) Antonie van Leeuwenhoek on atomic elements of diminutive animals as well as by his ‘protruding’ conception of matter.<sup>2</sup> A vast panorama on self-reflexiveness as much as on the blurred line demarcating animality from humanity, following a linear course of correspondences between animals and the alphabet, Zoo tells the story of two Siamese brothers, Oswald and Oliver Deuce, who, after both losing their spouses in a car accident caused by a large swan on Swan’s Way, become the lover of pregnant Alba (a white alpha?) Bewick, the driver who survived the same accident with an amputated leg. With Darwinian theories about the evolutionary leap from the primate to the first human for thematic background, the two twin O’s, zoologists and animal behaviourists fascinated by the cycle of life from the human’s atomic/adamic origin to its demise (from the alpha to the omega of Creation), create time-lapse videos of the slow decomposition of still lives (especially a worm-eaten, rotting apple, associated with Adam and Eve’s original sin) and animal corpses. They become obsessed with snails, and thanks to their contacts at the zoo, create decomposition videos of increasingly complex animals, moving gradually up the food chain. Alba, already mother of a daughter (Beta), is soon delivered of twins whose paternity she refuses the two brothers, granting it instead to one Felipe Arc-en-Ciel, a legless victim of another accident (under the hooves of a pregnant white mare). Meanwhile, she has her second leg amputated for the sake of a Vermeerian symmetry performed by her surgeon, a cousin of the forger of fake Vermeers whose true motive is to fashion her into a subject recreating the Dutch artist’s masterpieces (no woman’s leg is to be seen in any of Vermeer’s paintings). The Deuce brothers’ obsession with decay eventually leads them to the top of the food chain and to a complex life-death relationship with Alba, who voluntarily offers herself as the final specimen whose decay is to be filmed so that they can extend their anatomy research to a human subject. They also renounce their joint right to paternity in exchange for the assignment to them of L’Escargot, the family property where Alba was born and whose twenty-sixth, last inheritor she is. As the filming plan backfires due to her family’s timely intervention, Oliver and Oswald return to L’Escargot to commit suicide, arranging to capture their own decomposition by a time-lapse device which, however, is shorted out by a huge infestation of snails – one of the film’s last sequences shows the gastropods gyrating endlessly on the microgroove of the gramophone which provides the musical counterpart to the final scene.*

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Teeming with all manners of animal creatures, evolutionary motifs and pictorial references, Greenaway’s *Zoo* sets an ideal stage for the form which the following ‘study’ will take: a ‘Darwinian bestiary’ in several interlinked tableaux which will lead me to question the ends of mimesis and representation – of (the language of) the ‘animal’ as well as that of literature, of ‘animal literature’ – in a ‘regressive’ way since, following in the tracks of a ‘zoocentric’ counter-current exhumed by Margot Norris in *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst, and Lawrence*,<sup>3</sup> I will eventually have to invert the canonical laws

<sup>2</sup> Seer Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Jan Vermeer*, trans. Sylvie Bologna (Paris: Cercle d’Art, 1991), 11, 13.

<sup>3</sup> (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). Taking as her point of departure Darwin’s ‘animal gesture’ – his re-inscription of the difference between the human and the animal no longer as anthropocentric superiority but by uncovering a common biocentrism, and the ineradicably animal nature at the origin, a true biological trauma according to Freud – Norris deploys a critique of mimesis through the ‘self-reflexive animal metaphor(s)’ (1) of an animal ontology resisting representation, exposing its politicisation when it negates the power of the animal and corporeal life (5). The necessarily performative and experimental aspect of such a counter-tradition, intrinsically unsuitable for any recuperation and therefore for

of literary evolution. (This study could also have conjured up Guillaume Apollinaire's *Bestiary, or Procession of Orpheus*, in which, returning regularly among a gallery of animals, Orpheus the tamer of wild beasts through the suaveness of his songs, but equally the tutelary figure of the impossibility of literature for Maurice Blanchot,<sup>4</sup> would play for the poet the role that Derrida will assume with regard to the following evocations.) In order to illustrate this method, I will begin with a literary example drawn from Julian Barnes's cult novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, which narrates how the objective quest for the polymorphous biography of Flaubert the man and artist is at pains to conceal parallels with the subjective traumatism in the life of the doctor-narrator-writer Geoffrey Braithwaite – especially the fourth chapter entitled 'The Flaubert Bestiary', a modern rather than traditional (mediaeval) bestiary since at this particular point in the novel the allegorical quest is geared towards the artist's manifold animal-like signature rather than some sort of moral or religious transcendence.

Bearing as an epigraph an excerpt from a letter to Alfred Le Poittevin declaring 'I attract mad people and animals',<sup>5</sup> 'The Flaubert Bestiary' is structured as a zoographical catalogue of Gustave's 'bestly' polysignatures and, based on an extract of a letter to his mother, investigates the link between the artist and the monster – 'The artist, to my way of thinking, is a monstrosity, something outside nature' (*FP*, 50) – via several animal self-designations. Each chapter of Barnes's novel fashions its thematic-biographical material according to criteria of a critical or literary genre, as so many anatomies, dissections or diagnostics of the multiform object of the protagonist's research.<sup>6</sup> However, the quest turns against the searcher, who eventually exhibits, 'monstrates' the monstrous in him in a double impossible gesture of de-monstration at once reticent and desired.<sup>7</sup> A part for the

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any transmission from one generation to the next, made it unfit for survival in the aesthetic canon (5-6), hence its 'regressive evolution' (since one of Darwinism's victims was the humanistic notion of 'progress' of the species [223]) and the expression of this counter-current in minor and non-canonical works and genres (20) – see, for example, Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1933), a chronicle narrated in the first person by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog in which the 'canine' is affirmed instead of the canon: Pamela L. Caughie, 'Flush and the Literary Canon: Oh Where Oh Where Has That Little Dog Gone?', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10.1 (1991): 47-66. Mimesis would thus be essentially parrot-like and necessary to the constitution of an aesthetic 'tradition' capable of evolution and self-transmission, and the aim of zoocentric resistance would be to attempt to 'elevate' the animal without resorting to its humanisation or a generalised anthropomorphisation of Nature. For a revision of Norris's biocentric perspective especially in relation to the fable, in which the anthropomorphisation of the animal is construed, not as its uplifting or transcending of biology and speciesism, but as a downsizing of the human, see Chris Danta, *Animal Fables after Darwin: Literature, Speciesism, and Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Bestiary, or Procession of Orpheus*, trans., with an essay, by X. J. Kennedy, woodcuts by Raoul Dufy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). For Maurice Blanchot, see, for example, 'Rilke and Death's Demand' (especially 'Song as Origin: Orpheus' and 'Orphic Space') and 'Orpheus's Gaze', in *The Space of Literature*, trans. and intr. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 141, 154-6; 171-6.

<sup>5</sup> Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Pan Books, 1985), 49; hereafter *FP* with page references in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Straddling literary and empirical realities, art and life, *Flaubert's Parrot* deconstructs generic taxonomies thanks to the diverse masks of his polyvalent narrator: (auto)biographer, critic, essayist, examiner, lexicographer, train-spotter, psychologist, doctor but also patient on the dock needing to be cured and acquitted, existentialist philosopher, feminist, androgynous figure, etc.

<sup>7</sup> See Jacques Derrida, 'Some Statements and Truisms About Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms', trans. Anne Tomiche, in *The States of 'Theory': History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, ed. and intr. David Carroll (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 80. I have further developed the double-edged theme of 'de-monstration', as well as the double bind of the relationship between mastery and monstrosity at the dawn of English fiction (in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*), in

whole of the quest whose essence is revealed only in this fragmentary totality, this bestiary, itself made up of several *membra disjecta*, contains deep within itself, like barely hatched monsters, the germs of a reflection on the animality of the artistic product, of what (with)in literature derives not so much from an original attempt at the aesthetic mastery of the sublime, or even of an aesthetic sublimation, but rather, ‘primitively’, from a monstrous anti-aesthetics.

I would like to bring to a close this first tableau in my critical zoography with a question: what if literature was what begins with the human’s thematization of the animal as monster and ends with that of his/her own monstrous animality, either by successfully and heroically covering it (according to a classical paradigm), or by unearthing it in the light of other ‘historical’ scandals of origins (for instance, the diverse modernist and postmodern attempts to re-inscribe political violence at the origins of historico-cultural myths)? In order to begin tackling this ambitious question, I will first turn to two ‘contemporary’ texts which hark back to one of these founding myths: the story of Noah’s ark and of the restoration of the Covenant between the divine and the human, revised and corrected by Timothy Findley in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* and in the first chapter of another of Julian Barnes’s fictional texts, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*.

### **Commencement (*Arkhè*), Commandment (*Arkhon*), Noah’s Ark: Findley and Barnes**

The novel of the transposition, into a contemporary imaginary world, of the sacrifice of another possibility of History and Creation (Findley) and the ‘first’ in a series of fictional rewritings of ‘History’ as narration(s) (Barnes) both offer a re-reading of the (re)beginning of ‘humanity’ as the apocalyptic ‘end’ of the animal and of its freedom – the (re)beginning of the end, from the origin onwards.

Under the barely disguised features of a Mengele obsessed with race eugenics and fascinated by teratogenic crossbreeding and other related experiments on rare animal subjects, the Manichean Doctor Noah Noyes (from French *noyer*: to drown?) meticulously puts into execution Yaweh’s edict and operates a biological selection smacking of concentrationist policing: wanted, not wanted on the voyage (yes, no).<sup>8</sup> With its internal hierarchy – the guardians of the Law are on the upper deck, the subaltern and animals on the lower deck (*NWV*, 217) – the Ark itself is a vast and monstrous, sordid prison (*NWV*, 119-20). Later on, the monstrous is described as the mating between a woman and an animal (a bull), a conventional blasphemous image of the Order of divine Creation (*NWV*, 49) but also an allusion to the ancient tale of the Minotaur, begot from King Minos’ wife Pasiphaë’s unnatural intercourse with a bull. It is in those terms that the reader will be invited to judge the descent of the Noyes couple, revealed little by little to have been ape-like (e.g. *NWV*, 170), monstrous (including Noyes’s illegitimate union with his daughter-in-law Hannah; *NWV*, 340-1), or, more generally, animal (Shem, nicknamed the Ox on account of his primitive needs and inability to feel wonder) ever since the first child, Adam (*NWV*, 163).

Each of the four books of *Not Wanted on the Voyage* is conceived as an amplification, anchored to a verse from Genesis, of what has been censored by the Holy Scripture from the Universal History before the Flood, and its *dramatis personae* divide into two neatly

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‘De-monstrating Monsters: Unmastering (in) Derrida and Cixous’, *Parallax* 25.3 (2019): 269-87.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Findley, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (London: Arena, 1984), 3; hereafter *NWV* with page references in the text.

demarcated clans: the 'goodies', in harmony with animals whose 'natural' signs they are capable of interpreting (e.g. *NWV*, 13), open to all the possibilities of justice and of History, and whose 'animal politics' rests on solidarity without hierarchy (*NWV*, 229); the 'baddies', who represent despotic, monosemic, patriarchal authority, cannot understand animals or else interpret them according to their desire for confirmation of their own religious convictions, practise a politics based on ritualistic acts of gratuitous revenge (*NWV*, 266: the unicorn's beheading by Japeth after it was used by Noah Noyes to deflower Emma, the recalcitrant young bride). On one side the instinctual (as with the whispers of Mottyl the cat) and the pact of mutual aid beyond the speciesist segregation between humans and animals; on the other side univocal, discordant, brutal reason, acting in the Name of a literal Letter. On the one hand animal mythology, more feminine, etc; on the other hand phallogocentric, blindly sacrificial religion. One could multiply *ad libitum* these hierarchical, slightly too neatly binary oppositions.

However, such benevolently zoophilic polarizations can hardly conceal the strained anthropomorphisation of the animal, which divides twice at least – thematically incoherently so for the purpose of the message – into: a good animal thus born by nature (none of the animals is bad, and the 'natural' laws of predation are in fact largely ignored or else imputable to the cruelty of the divine plan; *NWV*, 145) or redeemed by motherly love (Mrs Noyes exclaiming 'but this *is* a human child! Lotte, like my Adam, was born of human flesh and doesn't that make her human?' [*NWV*, 173]); versus a bad animal, which stigmatizes the patriarch's degeneration or, more generally, *man's* before the renewal of the Covenant. The tacit denunciation of the negative allegorization and symbolization ascribed to Noah and his allies does not cancel out that Findley's otherwise witty novelistic project somehow goes down a dead end.<sup>9</sup> The redemption, even the tropological recuperation, of the lost animal – and the animal would here be defined as what the human agreed to sacrifice even before this second birth – is conditional upon the parodic as much as authoritarian reversal of the divine word, derided in a sacrilegious movement which seems oblivious to the fact that one can subvert well only what one has agreed straightaway to erect as an infrangible norm (for e.g., at the metatextual level, the unavoidable relation of 'filiation' of the novel to Genesis, some of whose verses are used as framing, introductory fragments).

Nevertheless, this irreducible inconsistency born of the Manichean simplification at the core of Findley's rewriting project also allows for the articulation of the original difference of the subject with itself and for the possibility of a constructive differend, since it can be the bearer of a possible reconciliation (*NWV*, 284), desired by Mrs Noyes in her dream of another world:

A long time ago [...] I heard a rumour of another world. [...] I wanted difference. And I had heard this rumour... about another world. [...] I wanted, too, someone I could argue with. Someone – just once – with whom I could disagree. [...] Who would say that dry is wet – and black is white? And if I were to say; '*I am not I – but whoever I wish to be,*' would I be believed – in this other world?... (*NWV*, 282)

The inverted rupture of the tautological self-begetting of the divine Logos ('I am who I am' in Exodus 3:14) uttered in '*I am not I*' ushers in the hope for a change, a renewed order, in

<sup>9</sup> Opposed to self-reflexive animal metaphors, on which her 'zoocentric' project is based, Norris criticizes what she calls the animal's 'tropological enslavement to the human' in literature's animal symbology: 'it seemed that nowhere in literature were animals to be allowed to be themselves, to refer to Nature and to their own animality without being pressed into symbolic service as metaphors, or as figures in fable or allegory (invariably of some aspect of the human).' (Norris, 17-18)

which, if one wishes to translate the revision of the divine performative according to a bicephalous logic of the French *je suis* (i.e. I am but also I follow), ‘to be’ and ‘to follow’ would be dissociated in order to pave the way at last for a becoming which would not merely be the repetition of the same.<sup>10</sup>

The novel ends on a status quo between the two clans of the Noyes family (*NWV*, 346-8; 350-1: Noah burns the divine icon after glimpsing the possibility of Yaweh’s death). Noah and his wife carry on wishing for ‘another world’ – the former a world of identity and return of/to the same, the latter a world of difference and differend lost and dreamt at the origin which would be the ‘trace’ of animality itself<sup>11</sup> – in a ‘voyage’ (the History of Creation) which will last as long as the ‘human’ will throw overboard what it has decreed and designated a priori as the animal (‘all the apes’; *NWV*, 349), the demonic, the magical monstrous (‘all the Unicorns’; *NWV*, 349).

The theme of the (re)beginning of the History of divine Creation combined with that of literature – of its transformation of the religious into the secular – is associated with the theme of survival of the human race and of the enslavement of nature in a crucial passage:

During Noah’s darkest days aboard the ark he thought much and often about his illustrious forebear. After all – historically, they shared the same responsibilities: the survival of the human race; the subjugation of nature; the establishment of law and order. [...] Three times over, Adam had begun the experiment and three times over he had begun with nothing but his own determination, his ingenuity and his relationship with God. (*NWV*, 238)

This double motif of the survival of the human and of the subjugation of the natural, even of the suppression of the marvellous and the magical (*NWV*, 283-4; 273: extinction of the unicorn, the ‘reality’ of a now bygone order, which has become ‘mythical’ and ‘imaginary’), is conveyed in Findley’s writing by an implicit, generic-stylistic questioning. Originating conceptually in a 1925 article by Franz Roh dealing with German post-expressionist art, translated two years later by Ortega y Gasset in the *Revista de Occidente*, then imported into the South American context via Alejo Carpentier’s famous 1949 essay on *lo real maravilloso americano*,<sup>12</sup> ‘magic realism (*magischer Realismus*), often used with a double aim of politicization of the fictional and fictionalization of the political, especially in post-colonial literature, is the generic-stylistic threshold which remains uncrossed by the writing of *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, haunted by its inability to express the human’s work of global colonisation and the irreversible scission, from genesis onwards, between the elect and the damned, or Preterites in Puritan theology (*NWV*, 209: survival dictated by the laws of divine predestination), which nullifies even the Darwinian law of the survival of the fittest in both the human and animal kingdoms, all creatures being subjected to divine prescription (*NWV*, 55: fleeting memory of an always already lost ancient order in which more justice used to prevail). Magic realism is aimed at what

<sup>10</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> In this context, it is worth recalling that the Derridean problematic of writing has always been linked from the beginning to that of the erasure of an animal trace, within a critique of an anthropocentrism which would have forgotten the ‘zoic’ origin of the Logos. For a synthesis discussing various references in Derrida’s work, see Laurent Milesi, ‘Derrida and Posthumanism (II): The Animality of the Trace’, ‘Genealogy of the Posthuman’ website of the Critical Posthumanism network; available at <http://criticalposthumanism.net/> [accessed 15 October 2021].

<sup>12</sup> For a reprint of these two seminal essays and a contextual introduction, see the excellent anthology edited and presented by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1995).

transcends 'supernaturally' the everyday and the 'natural'; it is a reminder that it can also be conceived as an attempt to re-establish a filiation with narrative traditions that have been overshadowed by mimetic constraints inherited from the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> The magic of the real would thus become a branch of naturalism and pragmatism,<sup>14</sup> and its goal would be to rediscover the plurality of fictional worlds (multiverses) as well as an intergeneric liminality and marginality to be invested by writing, which would allow for a flexing in the taxonomy of literary practices. However, in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, the utopian horizon of this possibility is always already foreclosed, 'not wanted on the voyage' onboard the novel's stylistic ark.

Thomas Pynchon's masterpiece *Gravity's Rainbow* remains perhaps the most thought-provoking reflection on the implications of the bifurcation of/in the future of the human genus, which is implicitly related to an underlying problematisation of the periodisation and genericity of the so-called 'postmodern' novel.

As early as its first Part ('Beyond the Zero'), Pynchon's hybrid historical fiction ponders over the meaning of the laws of determinism presiding over the extinction of the dodo on Mauritius in the seventeenth century, in a 'second flood' triggered not by God but by the 'Enemy':

But if they were chosen to come to Mauritius, why had they also been chosen to fail, and leave? Is that a choosing, or is it a passing-over? Are they Elect, or are they Preterite, and doomed as dodoes?<sup>15</sup>

The novel constantly raises the issue of knowing how to hope to reconcile with this 'regression' of History if not through a retrograde move back to the point when humanity went down the 'wrong' path. (This is of particular relevance to Tyrone Slothrop, the novel's protagonist in quest of his own origins and especially of the cause of a peculiar effect: he experiences erections in locations later impacted by the German V2 rocket, which travels faster than, and strikes before, the incoming sound of its destructive arrival could be heard, thus inverting the usual logic of causality.)

This outcome of a retrogression back towards the sacrifice of a choice 'at the origin' is most explicitly formulated when, wandering across the 'Zone' of a desolate post-WWII Germany, Slothrop evokes his ancestor William, modelled on Pynchon's own historical family lineage, who authored a Puritan pamphlet denouncing the preterition of souls and claiming sanctity for these 'second Sheep' without whom there would be no Elect (*GR* 555):

Could he have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? [...] It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back – [...] the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up. (*GR* 556)

What the episode about the extinction of the Mauritian dodo had already suggested is that, no matter how monstrous this may seem at first sight, the possibility of this return

<sup>13</sup> Zamora and Faris, 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Zamora and Faris, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973), 110; hereafter *GR* with page references in the text.

to the quasi-original difference constitutive of differences and ethical choices (between actuality and virtuality, realization and impossibility, election and sacrifice or damnation, etc.) can be achieved only through a deconstruction of those very categories of election and damnation in the sacrificial gesture, via the maximal risk of a thought which can put back into play any judgment of an ethical nature waged on preestablished demarcations: the ‘goodies’, chosen and saved; the ‘baddies’, damned and exterminated.<sup>16</sup>

I will bear in mind this consideration about the *involution* of time – which I will later oppose to evolution and its correlate of a so-called ‘natural’ selection in my reading of John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* – and endeavour to relate it to the haunting sacrifice of those narrative (or stylistic) plural choices which the novelistic text must leave behind in order to construct itself (at least according to a ‘classical’, linear vision of its plot and story), using *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* as a touchstone.

Oscillating between a novel and a structured collection of short stories, Julian Barnes’s revamped *History of the World*, transgeneric and transcategorical – between life and art, art and history, literature and criticism, etc. – could adopt as its motto Charles Darwin’s own words to the biologist George Romanes: ‘I tried to observe what passed in my own mind when I did the work of a worm’,<sup>17</sup> since its unlikely narrator and protagonist is a wormwood, an invisible pariah which, in the first aptly-titled rewriting (‘The Stowaway’), reveals some hidden facets in the episode of the Flood before resurfacing, often surreptitiously, in each of the following accounts. One could say, resorting to this fable’s underlying linguistic logic, that this woodworm indeed *worms its way* into each chapter-story, and that the patient undermining of the book-as-object in its very physical foundations is part and parcel of the (im)possibility of this fiction doomed to destruction. Thus, the third rewriting, titled ‘The Wars of Religion’, cast as a theological debate-cum-trial modelled on 15<sup>th</sup>-century instances of legal procedures and judgments kept in the Archives Municipales de Besançon, replays the indictment of woodworms for gnawing away at the city bishop’s throne, causing the ecclesiast’s (down)fall, whose outcome was the sentencing of the *bestioles* by the Church tribunal.<sup>18</sup> At the core of the argument by the ‘*procureur pour les insectes*’ lies the principle of the equality of Creation in front of divine blessing, the absence of Biblical proofs attesting to the malevolence of the afore-mentioned *bestioles* or of any mention of them in the episode of the Ark, which would not have been seaworthy had it harboured a xylophage.<sup>19</sup> Now if the Ark survived intact enough for the carrying Biblical episode to serve at the origin of a new beginning, the juridical archive was

<sup>16</sup> It should be remembered that such a fundamental indecision was also at the heart of historico-philosophico-theological debates and even polemics about the Holocaust, which provides a discreet background to Pynchon’s novel and is arguably the ‘event’ which precipitates the entry into postmodernism for thinkers like Theodor Adorno, Jean-François Lyotard, Maurice Blanchot, Gianni Vattimo and Zygmunt Bauman, among others. See, for instance, Laurent Milesi, ‘Postmodern Ana-Apocalypics: Pynchon’s V-Effect and the End (of Our Century)’, *Pynchon Notes* 42-3: ‘Approach and Avoid: Essays on Gravity’s Rainbow’, ed. Luc Herman (1998): 213-43, and Paul Crosthwaite, *Trauma, Postmodernism, and the Aftermath of World War II* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Norris, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Barnes’s use of the original French term implicitly recalls that *bestia*, reserved by jurists and grammarians to ferocious earthly animals but used colloquially for any wild or domestic animal species, was frequently used as a term of abuse. See *Le Robert. Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, vol. 1, 211, s. v. ‘bête’.

<sup>19</sup> Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (London: Pan Books, 1990), 71-72, 75; hereafter *HW* with page references in the text.

itself attacked by a kind of termite which gnawed at the Church judge's ultimate words (*HW*, 80, or amputated 'end' of the story). The 'last word', therefore, was 'hollowed out' by the xylophagous, word-eating parasite, opening up the subversive possibility of an in-finite narration as it chomps its way through the institutional 'woodspeak'.

But the woodworm's rewriting of the episode of the Flood is complicated by a clever double bind: between the denunciation of human cruelty committed in the name of the monstrous divine edict by revealing the apocalyptic unsaid in the Holy Scripture, and the repetition of anthropocentric narrative strategies appealing to the same notions of truth, credulity, objectivity (*HW*, 4, 16) and to the reader's *captatio benevolentiae* (*HW*, 3), founded by an individual's similar hegemonic takeover in the name of the whole community and a comparable desire to institute a (new) hierarchy, the superiority of the animal genus (*HW*, 28),<sup>20</sup> in spite of the allegiance to an alternative politics from before the 'fall' of the Flood whereby the natural laws of predation did not confer on the predator a special hierarchical superiority over its victim (*HW*, 10). Better: as it weaves the narration of its historical untruth, the wormwood affirms its genus's evolutive superiority in terms that transcend human identity in order to vie with that of the performative divine Logos: 'We [...] are always ourselves: that is what it means to be evolved. We are what we are, and we know what that is.' (*HW*, 28). Thus, perhaps, it performs itself into an autobiographical animal, a 'worm of its own', a problematic which Findley's novel stops short of since only Mrs Noyes rewrites the performative of divine self-begetting in her desire for a non-identitarian world (see *supra*). More still: the woodworm reveals that it was capable of flouting the numerical conditions stipulated by the divine decree, and

By some unhappy chance, our species had managed to smuggle seven members on board. Not only were we stowaways [...], not only were we unclean [...], but we had also mocked those clean and legal species by mimicking their sacred number. (*HW*, 11)

This 'unhappy chance' of an algebraic smuggling which mimes and thus undermines the cipher of divine Creation must be read in tandem with the following passage (*HW*, 12) on the foresight which allowed some animals to thwart predestination, for instance in the manifestation of cryptic coloration and mimicry with the chronic fear of being seen. At work here is a wholly different conception of mimicry and, through the reinscription of anthropocentric narrative strategies, of mimesis as parodic, blasphemous 'aping', which should be connected to the themes of filiation, citation, plagiarism, appropriation, subversion, etc. which make up an intertextual genealogy from Genesis to Barnes via Findley. (I will analyse further these notions of mimicry and cryptic coloration in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* alongside the passage on mimicry in Jacques Lacan's *Seminar XI* and John Keats's famous letter on the chameleon-poet. By way of an anticipatory parenthesis, I wish to recall that, in her 'thematic guide' to Canadian literature, *Survival*, Margaret Atwood ties the omnipresence of surviving in Canadian fiction to the powerful motif of the animal's victimisation, and stresses that the animal-oriented perspective which characterizes the narration of a Canadian 'anti-quest' – as opposed to American fiction's emphasis on the hunter's quest, notwithstanding the latter's demise in his pursuit of a

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<sup>20</sup> See also *HW*, 17-18, about the superiority of the animal due to the versatility of its talents, not to some arbitrary divine fiat. Thus, natural selection is described as a 'professional incompetence' (*HW*, 7) normalizing and legitimizing predestination. Dependent upon the arbitrary taxonomy of the divine scheme (*HW*, 11), the survival of the fittest is waged on the adaptability of natural resources to the conditions of the dogmatic system applied by Noah Noyes (*HW*, 8).

fantastical animal which turns out to be his destructive double (e.g. *Moby Dick*) – also allows for the revaluation of what ‘realism’ could be, for how can a non-anthropocentric narrative mimicry be conceived which could invent a voice and a language proper to the animal without the linguistic differend which would yet again subject it to models of human representation?<sup>21</sup>)

Barnes’s fiction alludes more or less directly to Findley’s text, even plunders it – shamelessly since the antecedent is (deliberately?) not recognized in the ‘Author’s Note’ at the end of the book: mention of the rhinos, hippos and elephants in the hold from the very beginning (*HW*, 3), clear allusion to ‘Not Wanted on Voyage’ (*HW*, 7), shared motifs and themes of the concentrationist ark, of the monstrous interbreeding of the human race from the proto-monster Noah versus the latter’s obsession with his purity, of the ideological, anti-egalitarian foundation of human ‘myths’ (opposition between the rationalizing myth of a (Darwinian) ‘natural selection’ and the reality of a divine election, loss of antediluvian miscegenation which postlapsarian man can picture to himself only as imaginary creations or ‘fantasies’; *HW*, 15), etc.<sup>22</sup> At the beginning, therefore, there was the *arkhè* as both commencement (‘the principle according to nature or history’) and commandment (‘the principle according to the law’),<sup>23</sup> the ark and the archive – a non-etymological, playful association which the woodworm’s self-indulgent narration does not hesitate to tap, the book-as-ark containing the historical archive whose gaps are filled in with the woodworm’s testimony, but also the holy and profane intertextual archives (the Bible, Barnes’s and Findley’s novels) comprising the Ark. This book of rewritings, whose future is precarious because it is worm-eaten throughout, is therefore a kind of ark which bears within itself the literary archive of the episode in Genesis already reworked by Findley and which stages the myth’s resilience towards subversion as well as the necessary adaptability of forms which convey its political hegemony – I will soon come back to this political threshold traced by the Flood in light of another reading-within-a-reading: that of Hegel in *Glas*, summoned by ‘the survival of the human race; the subjugation of nature; the establishment of law and order’ cited above. History, but also narration which constitutes its essence, as this series of fictional rewritings reminds us, is itself this selective ark/archive in which the human, on God’s authority, has recorded only its mythical version of facts.

These two exemplary fictions indirectly raise another issue, revealing in its evolutionist metaphors: the issue of the ceaselessly complicated relation of literary ‘filiation’, and in particular of (profane) ‘derivation’ from a (hallowed) ‘original’ whose founding model would be God’s creation of the human in His image as well as Adamic descent in the image of our first parent. Now the ‘aping’ which haunts Noah’s lineage

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996), 74-5 (‘Animal Victims’). For a thematically-related essay on one of Atwood’s more recent fictions, see Lee Frew, “‘A Whole New Take on Indigenous’: Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* as Wild Animal Story”, *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature Canadienne* 39.1 (2014): n. p.; available at <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/scl/article/view/22762/26427> [accessed 19 October 2021].

<sup>22</sup> Another patent, and equally unacknowledged, intertext is *Die Rättin (The Rat)*, the novel by the German animal chronicler Günter Grass, originally published in 1986 and translated into English the year after, while Barnes was at work on his own project of the rewriting of history. A good number of the themes and motifs briefly documented here, rather than narrative strategies properly speaking, are discernible in this mixture of revision and prospective vision of the history of the world according to a female rat; such as, in the first chapter, the account of Noah and sons’ interdict to the rats about boarding the Ark, an episode which serves as a Biblical prototype of the post-human apocalypse threatening our consumer society in the nuclear age and which will see the rat superseding man in the evolutionary chain.

<sup>23</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1.

in the two profane rewritings, at the rebeginning of humanity, is nothing but intertextual lineage, the fall of the sacred into the parodic, blasphemous secular, the ape-like mimicry of literary antecedents echoing the monstrous *bêtise* of Noah's race. This very same *bêtise* conceived as the human's lack of originarity and 'primacy', the essential defect 'at the origin' (Bernard Stiegler's '*le défaut qu'il faut*'<sup>24</sup>), would no doubt be the definitional criterion of 'bad' fiction for the 'liberal-humanist' camp whence protestations against the lack of originality, let alone against plagiarism, still often emanate. According to this classical *ordo* of 'good' literature, which was compromised as early as the novel's very infancy, characterized by terminological contamination, miscegenation and transgeneric hybridity (Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*), there would be mastery on one side (the plenitude of the adequacy of the literary product to the conditions of a mythical originality guaranteeing its status and stature) and, on the other side, monstrosity (hybridization, degeneration, lapse into caricature).<sup>25</sup>

In a brief swerve, I will honour my promise of jumping aside towards *Glas* and the double column which, on the left, derives the significance of the Flood in the light of Hegel while on the right, standing straight as a righteous steed, a jennet (Genet) is revealed 'mounted astride his proper name'.<sup>26</sup> For Hegel, 'the narrative of a catastrophic event reconstitutes the ideal-historical origin of human society' (G 46a), and this 'eagle' weighed down with the Absolute Summa of Philosophical Knowledge, led on the left-hand side like a beast of burden (*bête de 'somme'*), sees in the Flood the loss of the state of nature. The text goes on:

Before the flood (*Flut*) man lived in natural harmony with nature. The flood tears at man, drags him away from nature, destroys the beautiful unity. From that point on man nurses an infinite, monstrous distrust [...] of nature. It is no longer his mother, she has taken back or poisoned all the resources of protective belief [...] she had given or promised. [...]

In the flood, man then conceives the project of dominating in turn what had sheltered, protected and nourished him. (G 46a)

An overturning – hence, in a sense, 'monstrous' – mastery, akin to the beginning of conception itself: this patriarchal arch-concept is Noah, drawn towards noesis by Derrida, whose act of conception as domination marks the interruption of a first state of love:

The noetic response to the murderous aggression of the mother is thenceforth accompanied [...] by a cult of life (*Zoe*). Man was forbidden to kill man. Breaking this rule means you lose your own life. Such is the contract of thought with itself, i.e. with God. As a recompense, God gives man mastery (*Herrschaft*) over the plants and the animals. (G 47a)

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<sup>24</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), especially 121. Originally scheduled to be the third volume in the five-, then seven-volume *Technics and Time* project, *Le défaut qu'il faut* was postponed and finally never published.

<sup>25</sup> Milesi, 'De-monstrating Monsters', 270.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Clang*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and David Wills (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 43b; hereafter *G* with page reference and column identification in the text. This excerpt, translated differently, is recalled in '*Ja*, or the *faux-bond* II', in *Points...: Interviews, 1974- 1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf & others (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 65-6; hereafter '*Ja*' with page references in the text.

If, as Andrew McKenna and others rightly emphasize, the feeling of being a Holocaust survivor, of being therefore *nachträglich*, *après coup*, is indissociable from our postmodern consciousness,<sup>27</sup> then Barnes and Findley invite us to think that our ‘postmodernity’ could be traced as far back as the Flood, to Nature’s holocaust, to the survival / rebeginning of the human race founded on divine rather than natural selection (*HW*, 21; 12: ‘post-Ark years’).

Riding in cavalier fashion on the excuse of this dexterous Spanish jennet, I would now like to champ at another *bit* of my bestiary, unbridling it, rather than reining it in, by following in another track Derrida our ringleader, who, writing about *Glas*, advised ‘to let oneself be taken in a little longer by the words, the morsels of words or of dead bits {*mors*} in decomposition that let the writing go a bit more unbridled.’ (*Ja*’ 52)

### The Wing’d Horse (of) Poesy: *The Studhorse Man*

Robert Kroetsch’s tall tale sports one Hazard Lepage in his failed quest for the perfect mare so that the sole survivor of a race of studs perpetuated over six generations of horse-breeders from father to son, the blue stallion Poseidon (shortened to Posse, Pussy or Poesy), may continue to procreate the pure equine dynasty. (The biographical narrative soon informs us that Lepage’s poetry and philosophy amounted to no more than a collection titled *The General Stud Book*, in which he saw man’s history and theology in a nutshell.<sup>28</sup>) A novel of the quest for origins studded with paronomastic cross-breeding, such as ‘mare’ with *mare* (Latin for ‘sea’) and *mère* (mother) as the lost object of original desire, *The Studhorse Man* also recounts, alongside the transmission of this doomed quest, the apocalyptic return to original nothingness: the man with the stud, also a stud of a man, or mythical centaur – both their procreative errancies follow a parallel course – is trampled to death by Poesy, and his (poetic) *desire* to save the stallion’s bloodline from extinction, de-sired by the animal itself, ironically turns into a *nightmare*: ‘Death was a nightmare presence bent on snuffing Hazard into a longer darkness.’ (*SM*, 167)<sup>29</sup>

In the page man’s sterile search, man and horse are united in the double bind of having to ensure the continual pregnancy of many mares (*mères*) whose PMU (pregnant mares’ urine) also provides a base ingredient in the contraceptive pill, the oestrogen or female hormone which makes it possible to stamp out the proliferation of humanity (*SM*, 189) and thus to *deliver* it stillborn (*SM*, 190) – the verbal signifier, pregnant with a double meaning, serves as a linguistic midwife at the end of the novel. The ultimately deadly accident (since Hazard allows himself to be killed under Poesy’s hooves) occurs when the narrator and secret rival (Demeter Proudfoot) is about to mate with the ‘bride’ eternally betrothed, never wed to Hazard, which later will give birth to another man’s daughter, also called Demeter, who will take over Lepage’s family name, carry the torch of his passion for horses, and to which the biographical novel is dedicated in its concluding lines. Demeter, the masculine narrator’s forename, eventually becomes feminized with the ‘pure’ daughter born from one Eugene Utter (i.e. utterly well-born), just as Lepage (masculine) will give way to the page

<sup>27</sup> Andrew J. McKenna, ‘Postmodernism: It’s Future Perfect’, in *Postmodernism and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and Donn Welton (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 229.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Kroetsch, *The Studhorse Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), 11; hereafter *SM* with page references in the text.

<sup>29</sup> For a comparable thematic analysis of Kroetsch’s novel, see also Sylvia Söderlind, ‘Canadian Cryptic: The Sacred, the Profane, and the Translatable’, *Ariel* 22.3 (1991): especially 91-3. Let us remember that originally ‘nightmare’ referred to ‘[a] female spirit or monster supposed to beset people and animals by night, settling upon them when they are asleep and producing a feeling of suffocation by its weight.’ (*OED*, s. v., 1. a.)

(*la page*: feminine) of equestrian History which she will perhaps write on/with Poesy, thus somehow ensuring the textual survival of the 'stud-text'.

*The Studhorse Man* plays on the fruitless crossing between mythological and fictional genealogies: Demeter, mother goddess of the Earth as religious, mythical and fertile element, is known for her quest for her lost daughter – here inverted into the quest for the mare/*mère* but also for the dead subject of this bio(thanato)graphy – and was pursued by Poseidon while she was mourning Persephone's loss. The goddess escaped and took the form of a mare, hiding from him among the horses of King Onkios, but Poseidon, disguised as a stallion, raped her after hunting her down in Arcadia. Demeter gave birth to the horse Areion and to a daughter, the 'Mistress' – Marthe, Lepage's eternal betrothed, means '(house) mistress' in Aramaic – whose name it was forbidden to *utter*. Poseidon itself is at the origin of several mythical genealogies, including Pegasus, which struck the Muses' Mount Helicon with its hoof and caused the Hippocrene (i.e. horse spring), whose water was famed for stimulating poetic inspiration, to burst forth.

Via an allegory thinly veiled by so much rustic frolicking in the Canadian far west, this prose, even 'prosy' novel, narrates its own (im)possibility to beget (itself from) poetry (Poesy): the strike of the hoof puts an end to both Lepage and the page of the book instead of giving rise to the poetic spring, just as Pegasus never was the fruit of the forced love between Demeter (here the narrator who takes on Hazard's quest in his own name) and Poseidon the horse-god, even though this 'stud-book' implicitly fantasizes its own textual survival. The aborted mythologico-fictional cross-fertilizations reveal the impossible desire to create poetic parenthood though a prose text whose unstable signature hesitates between poetry and mythology: the purebred poem, the pure poem, is therefore also a myth. Mythicized as Poseidon, Poesy can be only at the origin of a pregnancy with neither end nor offspring: the crossbreeding of poetry by prose remains forever sterilely big with an undelivered meaning – deferred, for instance, in the paronomastic errancies woven throughout *The Studhorse Man*. The desire for 'poetic' originality is de-sired in the prose of the biographer Demeter Proudfoot, whose name can be tied to Hazard's demise under the stallion's proud hoof – not long before, he had intended to kill him and, as the victim's bio(thanato)grapher, offers to bequeath to History the present of the deceased, who was terrorized by the prospect of immortalization (*SM*, 12, 38).

What Kroetsch's allegory stages is not so much the ceaselessly renewed mythical dream of poetry/Poesy's begetting through signifying errancy, but rather a sort of logic of obsequence<sup>30</sup> at the heart of this thematization of sterility and stillborn life: the hero 'is'/follows the mare/*mère* who, like Poesy, kills whatever it brings to life (or fails to), just as the narrator follows (especially) in the footsteps of the dead page and 'is', via the homonymous daughter, the filly which will pace anew the Canadian landscape in order to perpetuate the fabled race of the stud(horse man). In the straight tradition and line of descent of North-American writing, whether poetic (Walt Whitman, Charles Olson, Edward Dorn) or in prose (many Canadian novelists<sup>31</sup>), *The Studhorse Man* also turns out to be a critical

<sup>30</sup> First developed in *Glas* (passim), then briefly reprised in 'Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name', trans. Avital Ronell, in *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie V. McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 17-18, the logic of obsequence refers to what happens within an 'elementary kinship structure' when one says *je suis*: I am / follow a dead parent, for instance during the procession at a funeral or obsequy, in their footsteps, including by inheritance, when one becomes the next one in line. I have commented on other aspects of the Derridean logic of obsequence in relation to animality in 'Saint-Je Derrida', *Oxford Literary Review* 29 (2007): 55-76.

<sup>31</sup> See especially Graham Huggan, *Territorial Disputes: Maps and Mapping Strategies in Contemporary*

*geo-graphy* of the rough-and-ready Canadian west (Alberta) as it was emerging after World War Two, written in a half-marvellous, half-real, generically unstable – or *in stable* – hybrid style, which confesses on the burlesque mode its powerlessness to freeze-frame the Canadian geocultural experience, *a mari usque ad mare*, not unlike the stud which unstoppably trots from mare to mare or the womanizing Lepage who horses about from Martha to Marie (in the Bible, resurrected Lazarus' two sisters). Furthermore, *The Studhorse Man* travesties and turns upside down the specifically Canadian topos of man's identification with the (hunted) animal which for Margaret Atwood lies at the core of the representation of national experience, and ultimately of the fear of extinction of the individual and the species in the throes of the cultural hegemony of the United States.<sup>32</sup>

Just like an unbridled purebred whose reproduction and generation have to be secured at all costs, *The Studhorse Man*, taking a leaf out of Lepage's poetico-philosophical *General Stud Book*, straddles and stallionizes the Canadian wild from *mare* to *mare*. But as it repeatedly comes close to sagging under an overwhelming display of interpretive peregrinations, the *raconteur's* odyssean narration (Kroetsch's writing?) is blighted by an impotence to be delivered of the poetic, and its excess of prosy garrulity is at pains to conceal its unfulfilled scriptural mission.

Replying to a question on his fear of being read by the Spanish horse, alias Genet, that would have been reined in and let down through his writing, Derrida glosses thus in '*Ja*, or the *faux-bond II*' (which let us recall opens with a long quotation from the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* bearing on the conception of falsehood as '*the thing which was not*' in the superior equine race of the Houyhnhnms:

Fear because the horse I am straddling – the text – the textual force on which I am mounted must be stronger than me, must not let itself be dominated, broken, or mastered by the bit that it has or that I put or that I take in its mouth. [...] I am afraid because it/id concerns me {*ça me regarde*}, because the other thing is watching what I do and carries me off at the very moment I try all sorts of mastering maneuvers. I try to explain the law governing this relation in *Glas* and why, as I write, it is I who am being read first of all by what I claim to write, by Genet and a few others, who may also be dead and, for one reason or another, in no state to read or do damage. ('*Ja*' 66)

Derrida-the-reader's carefully-wrought *écriture* is thus groomed as a two-way process, a sort of *menagerie à deux*. Or to translate it back into the programmatic terms of Kroetsch's mythopoetic fiction: how can one at the same time critically master the horse (of) Poesy while straddling it, unleashing its poetic style, without running the risk of dismounting it into prose?

### Survival of the Fittest Plot: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

From the opening chapter on, in which the Lyme Regis Cobb dear to Victorians is compared in a double anachronistic gesture to a statue of the classical Michelangelo (backwards) and also to a work by Henry Moore (forwards), Fowles's mock-historicizing romance flouts the code of novelistic verisimilitude governing the kind of fiction which the author, with

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*Canadian and Australian Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

<sup>32</sup> Atwood, 75, 79 ('Animal Victims') and 32 ('Survival'), about surviving as symbolically central to Canada's experience as a physical and cultural space haunting both English and French fiction. See also James Polk, 'Lives of the Hunted: The Canadian Animal Story and the National Identity', *Canadian Literature* 53 (1972): 51-9.

calculated ostentation, declared he wanted to undertake. If the narrator's style is resolutely entrenched in 1867, the date when events in the fictional story occur, it is equally located a century away, at the time of the novel's composition, and the reader is periodically reminded that 'the year of which I write'<sup>33</sup> necessitates an 'adaptation', even a stylistic-linguistic 'translation' into a contemporary idiom, for e.g. 'What we call opium [Mrs Poulteney] called laudanum' (*FLW*, 82); 'A modern existentialist would no doubt substitute "humanity" or "authenticity" for "piety"' (*FLW*, 398). The parodic nature of a 'period style' is thus exposed since such an artificial, imitative gesture can be construed as 'historical' only retrospectively, just like any inevitably hybrid, literary-historical reconstruction or imitation. The novel's 'style' thus sets itself up as a Janus-faced interpreter and flaunts its ability to mediate the linguistic and cultural gap between epochs (e.g. *FLW*, 137, about lesbianism).

This famous example of double writing in a narration as historical artefact – 'original' since it is both retrospective and prospective (e.g. *FLW*, 398) – straddles the socio-historical fault line separating the Victorian and 'modern' cultures. It operates in sync with the struggles of an average 'progressive' Victorian mind (*FLW*, 319: 'every Victorian had two minds') versed in Darwin's evolutionist theories propagated with the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*,<sup>34</sup> yet having trouble adapting behaviourally to these new-fangled ideas. Let us note, for instance, the irony of intellectual 'selections' which the eponymous protagonist, Charles, carves out of Darwinism, which includes and accepts personal extinction but remains impervious to the species' generalized extinction. In short, 'Charles called himself a Darwinist, and yet he had not really understood Darwin.' (*FLW*, 47)<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London: Pan Books, 1987 [1969]), 7, 23, 228; hereafter *FLW* with page references in the text.

<sup>34</sup> For a modern edition of the original publication, see Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, ed. with intr. and notes by Gillian Beer, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), a reproduction based on the 1876 edition, which incorporates crucial addenda introduced from the fifth edition onwards (1869), especially the retitling of the crucial fourth chapter, 'Natural Selection', as 'Natural Selection; or the Survival of the Fittest' to incorporate Herbert Spencer's phrase.

<sup>35</sup> The thematically-relevant, intertextual anchoring points, whose occasional anachronism thus stretches beyond the time-bound framework of Charles Smithson's intellectual experience, are indicative of the painful threshold which must be crossed in order to accede to modern thinking. They range from the literary monument whose composition was coextensive with the inception of the Victorian era, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, in which the poet expressed his anguished feelings in the face of a cultural and spiritual sea-change (the rise of Darwinism and scientific positivism versus the decline of spirituality) and of a conflict between private life and public image, to Matthew Arnold, who in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) reported similar findings, or to Thomas Hardy, often quoted in epigraphs, active after 1867 only (which, as Fowles learned later, was a crucial year in the writer's personal life; see John Fowles, 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel', in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury [Manchester: Manchester University Press; Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977], 146)), and a retrospective symbol of the advent of modernity, via Marx and *Das Kapital* (also 1867), which allegedly extended some of Darwin's conclusions to the politico-economic organisation of society, etc. And even when anachronism is easily rejected by preterition – for e.g.: 'I am sure the young woman whom I should have liked to show pushing a perambulator (but can't, since they did not come into use for another decade) had never heard of Catullus' (*FLW*, 358) – the self-reflexive, 'postmodern' narrator turns out to be the Victorian chronicler of literary-historical facts documenting the era's obsolete taxonomic mentality.

But the most striking feature of this novel of epochality, crises and selections of all kinds (natural, intellectual, sexual) is its bifurcation into twice two possible denouements, depending on the degree of free will, determinism and evolution accessible to the protagonist in this mixed 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century fictional environment (more specifically, the quasi-impossibility for a character to emancipate its fate from the limitations dictated by the historical context; *FLW*, 66). Prepared *inter alia* by the symbolic Chapter Thirteen, in which the hitherto ‘conventional’ narration is paused and the narrator reviews the modes of autonomy of his characters freed by his imagination as well as those of the conditioning of his own manoeuvres by these paper creations, these narrative choices or three possible methods of survival which in each case correspond to one of the stages necessary to Charles’s own ‘evolution’ can be summarized as follows:

1° Ernestina’s behaviour agrees so well with what is expected of a docile Victorian woman that ‘she leaves me no alternative but to conclude that she must, in the end, win Charles back from his infidelity’ (*FLW*, 220), hence the first choice of a ‘period’ denouement: the happy, moral scenario according to which the adulterous lover and the understanding young girl will be reunited (*FLW*, 288 ff.). Yet, with the benefit of historical hindsight, the narrator discloses the risk of such a relationship running aground (*FLW*, 292), thereby exposing the morally reassuring yet deceptive artificiality of the happy Victorina ending – in this respect, one recalls Charles Dickens’s novelist friend, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, pleading for a happier denouement to Pip and Estella’s reunion in *Great Expectations* (1861), one more palatable to the readership of the times. Thus, we learn (*FLW*, 295) that this traditional solution had been imagined by Charles between London and Exeter, hence:

2° The double ‘modern’ choice: Charles decides to breach Victorian conventions and meets up with Sarah (*FLW*, 296 ff.) – from the textual recall of ‘Are we stayin’ the night?’ – which subsequently branches off into two sub-scenarios after Charles loses sight of his mistress:

- a) ‘happy’ ending: Charles finds Sarah again and the two lovers are reunited. But this ‘new’ adaptation of the sentimental ending is in turn subjected to ‘the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the “real” version’ (*FLW*, 349), tyrannical since it is the only one which does not stand corrected by yet another serial denouement:

- b) ‘unhappy’ ending: the two lovers carry on with their separate lives, even though this option is presented as a new ‘existentialist’ departure, albeit with a twist to one last Victorian textual echo, the last line of ‘To Marguerite’ (quoted on *FLW*, 366), ‘perhaps the noblest short poem of the whole Victorian era’ (*FLW*, 365). These two modern variants are articulated on another textual recall: ‘No. It is as I say [...]’ (*FLW*, 388, 395).

These serial, arborescent endings, typical of a postmodern transhistoricity which, like Charles, ‘[is] struggling to overcome history’ (*FLW*, 257, in the context of a parallel between 1267 and 1867), are the hallmark of the novel’s ‘ambidextrous’ writing – to borrow part of the title of Martin Gardner’s *The Ambidextrous Universe* (1967), cited in the first, modern epigraph to the final chapter. Transcending historical limitations in a polychronic style which puts the human species’ evolution and adaptability to the test through the viability of conflictual denouements and the survivability of the fittest plot as parameters of a larger debate about the survival and mutation of literary forms, Fowles’s writing pushes to its ultimate development the plurality of genetic possibilities inherent in a novel’s *mise-en-oeuvre* which was surreptitiously, and somewhat almost accidentally, glimpsed in the case of *Great Expectations*, or even James Joyce’s modernist exploration in *Ulysses* of those plural narrative-stylistic ramifications usually sacrificed to a streamlined plot or story. In ‘adapting’ the Victorian topos of Darwin’s evolutionist theories into a ‘postmodern’ device, in which the confusion of (hi)story planes is indissociable from the jamming of

categories of determinism and free will – viz. the innumerable ironic twist in ‘he [Charles] was a highly intelligent being, one of the fittest, and endowed with total free will’ (*FLW*, 164; also 144) versus the increasing awareness of his ossification and of feeling like ‘a victim of evolution’ (*FLW*, 250) – Fowles critically restages the Romantic myth, already dented in the *Ulysses* episode of ‘Oxen of the Sun’ (where ontogeny supposedly recapitulates phylogeny, according to Ernst Haeckel’s 1866 Biogenetic Law, and the maturation of the English literary language foetal evolution<sup>36</sup>), of fiction’s mimetic power and ability to model itself on the living organism, the fascination for biological, organicist and evolutionist models as foundational to the gestation of literary forms.

Without necessarily subscribing to the materialist attempt at a Darwinian theory of literary evolution sketched by Franco Moretti in his essay ‘On Literary Evolution’ – where he adaptively applies Prigogine and Stengers’s concept of ‘bifurcation’ to the plot’s necessary turning points and to the deterministic laws governing the vicissitudes of the greatest literary-historical variations, as well as Gould and Vrba’s notion of ‘exaptation’ in order to designate the deployment of a literary element or principle to a function other than the one for which it had originally been conceived<sup>37</sup> – the (at least) double *reflection* of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* on literary evolutionism, even, at a remove, on the adaptability and survival of the vey theme of the evolution of forms, deserves some attention, if only because it is reminiscent of the assimilatory ‘naturalisation’ of (the implications of) evolutionist theories by post-Darwinian fiction itself.<sup>38</sup> Let us resume with a key passage in Fowles’s text:

Charles [...] had more than one vocabulary. [...] he was almost three different men; and there will be others of him before we are finished. We may explain it biologically by Darwin’s phrase: *cryptic coloration*, survival by learning to blend with one’s surroundings – [...] Very few Victorians chose to question the virtues of such cryptic coloration (*FLW*, 127)

The unifying thread of ‘cryptic coloration’ ties (the hero’s) ontogeny and (his species’ and society’s) phylogeny to the text as living organism, which is likewise the product of a genesis and is programmed structurally to deploy a narrative in time, within which this ‘cryptography’ is at work – even though it is at work deceptively since one can never be sure at which level and when it operates. In the words of Elizabeth Rankin, ‘[s]ince the conventions of the novel have “evolved” in order to imitate more closely the “real world” of twentieth century existentialism, this particular novel must blend with its particular environment in order to survive.’<sup>39</sup> Theodor Adorno had already sensed how much the

<sup>36</sup> A committed Darwinist, Haeckel theorized that the stages an animal embryo undergoes during development are a chronological replay of that species’ past evolutionary forms, a grand scheme which Joyce parodies in Chapter Fourteen of *Ulysses*. See Joyce’s letter to Frank Budge, dated 20 March 1920, in *Letters of James Joyce, Volume 1*, ed. Stuart Gilbert (London: Faber, 1957), 140.

<sup>37</sup> Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders. Essays on the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trad. Susan Fischer et al. (London: Verso, 1997 [1983]), 262-78. It must be recalled, however, that Darwin’s readings in linguistic theory as well as his acquaintance with new ideas by comparatist and etymologist grammarians afforded a model of thinking at a crucial stage in the consolidation of his own theories, language’s evolutionist processes being apprehended by analogy with those of organic life. See Gillian Beer, ‘Darwin and the Growth of Language Theory’, in *Nature Transfigured: Science and Literature, 1700-1900*, ed. John Christie and Sally Shuttleworth (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), 152-70, and Norris, 29 ff.

<sup>38</sup> See Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth D. Rankin, ‘Cryptic Coloration in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*’, *Journal of Narrative Technique* 3.3 (1973): 196.

desire for representational mimicry which haunts novelistic form was inseparable from its ability to evolve *together with* its own evolutive taxonomic criteria, such as ‘realism’: ‘*If the novel wants to remain true to its realistic heritage and tell how things really are, it must abandon a realism that only aids the facade in its work of camouflage by reproducing it.*’<sup>40</sup>

It is against a shifting literary-historical backdrop, comparable to nature’s or society’s dynamic environment, which for Darwin was made up of the many matrices of individual interactions, that this adaptation must project itself in order to survive, failing which ‘cryptic coloration’ would remain but as a sterile *trompe l’oeil*, subservient to a narrow and naïve conception of mimesis and mimicry.

In the section of *Seminar XI* dedicated to the gaze, Jacques Lacan, following Roger Caillois in *Méduse et compagnie*, goes against the traditional conception according to which phenomena of mimicry (‘the register of coloration’) are regarded as ‘more or less successful facts of adaptation’ to protective ends in order to ensure the survival of the species, and rather sees in travesty, camouflage and intimidation ‘the three headings that are in effect the major dimensions in which the mimetic activity is deployed’.<sup>41</sup> Lacan goes on:

Indeed, it is in this domain that the dimension by which the subject is to be inserted in the picture is presented. Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage, in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled [...].

[...]

Whenever we are dealing with imitation, we should be very careful not to think too quickly of the other who is being imitated. To imitate is no doubt to reproduce an image. But at bottom, it is, for the subject, to be inserted in a function whose exercise grasps it. (*S*, 99-100)<sup>42</sup>

Before briefly defining the function of the gaze in painting:

It is obviously not for nothing that we have referred to as picture the function in which the subject has to map himself as such. [...] In the picture, the artist [...] wishes to be a subject, and the art of painting is to be distinguished from all others in that, in the work, it is as subject, as gaze, that the artist intends to impose himself on us. (*S*, 100)

If Derrida is afraid of being read by the one on whom he claims to write (‘*Ja*’, 66; quoted above), this is indeed because the reversal of the ‘read writer’s gaze upon himself exposes in broad daylight the effects of mimicry no longer as mere imitation – for e.g. ‘adapting’ one’s style to the other in order to ‘harmoniz[e] with the background’ – but rather as it inscribes him as other in a *tableau vivant* which concerns / looks at him more than he can see it (viz. the anecdote with Petit-Jean, *S*, 95). And in Fowles’s novel this gesture of inscription would

<sup>40</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, ‘The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel’, in *Notes to Literature, Volume One*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 32 (original emphasis). See also Joyce’s letter to his brother Stanislaus, dated 3 December 1906, protesting against Thomas Hardy’s lack of realist veracity: ‘Is this as near as T.H. can get to life, I wonder?’ (*Selected Joyce Letters*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking, 1975), 137).

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1981), 99; hereafter *S* with page references in the text.

<sup>42</sup> One should tacitly compare this passage with the function of cryptic coloration in social roles (*FLW*, 244) and with the passage in which Sam the servant ‘apes’ the gentleman (*FLW*, 285).

be imputable to the 'impresario' (the narrator masquerading as the writer as well as the 'real' writer, John Fowles, who is aware of being represented by / delegated to a near-omniscient narrator within the period fictional frame; *FLW*, 394), who, from the commanding vantage point of his transhistorical, transdiegetic and intersubjective perspective, suggests the impossible mastery of the different gazes on/within this tableau by representing both this blind spot from which the image / the scene returns the gaze, *and* the eye of an all-seeing projectionist.

The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Charles Smithson and, more generally, to this literary-historical panorama on display in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (which constantly plays with various photo/cinematographic frames), where, under the double cross-reflecting action of the Victorian and postmodern eras (viz. *FLW*, 257-8, about the power of self-analysis in adaptation), the organicist foundations of realist-naturalist mimesis, of the adaptability of narrative-stylistic scenarios for a possible survival, of the doctrines and thematizations of novelistic or, more generally, literary evolutionism, themselves undergo the effect of a reversal of perspective to become the lures of a critical mastery. Fowles's writing is therefore no longer *mimesic*, a belief in a 'positive' captation of reality effects in a literary *mise-en-oeuvre* (see also 'Ja', 54, 56), but it blends into the background which it reads/(re)writes by mimetic camouflage, thus losing its 'identity', risking individual sacrificial death in order to ensure the survival of the species. Therefore, it has more to do with the Keatsian conception of the chameleon poet who, diametrically opposed to the ostentatious peacock and Wordsworth's 'egotistical sublime' ('which is a thing per se and stands alone') – as well as to classical conception, refuted by Lacan, of chameleonic mimicry as essentially adaptative – 'is not itself [...] has no self [...] is every thing and nothing [...] has no character', and, like a photographic process, 'enjoys light and shade':

What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually [...] filling some other Body [...]<sup>43</sup>

An *écriture* in the negative (no longer simply a photographic writing) and a negation of the poet as subject: survival becomes hazardous, as perilous as that of the poematic (no longer even poetic) hedgehog (*hérisson, istrice*) of Derrida's '*Che cos'è la poesia?*'<sup>44</sup> And not unlike the temporal bifurcation and Slothrop's dream of a historical retroprojection in *Gravity's Rainbow*, evolution in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* threatens to regress within itself, to become an *involution*.

<sup>43</sup> John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 227-8 (letter to Richard Woodhouse, dated 27 October 1818). See also Thomas Dutoit, 'Pour une caméléopoétique: Keats et Hazlitt', in *Poétiques de l'indéterminé: le caméléon au propre et au figuré*, ed. Valérie Deshoulières (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires de Clermont-Ferrand, 1999), 89-106.

<sup>44</sup> See Jacques Derrida, '*Che cos'è la poesia?*', in *Points...*, 288-99.

## Involutions: Towards a *Regressive Literature*

‘The Snail is progress.’

‘Progress is a snail’<sup>45</sup>

One need only remember how difficult Charles Smithson finds it to fight against identificatory resemblance with the ammonite, this sea fossil with a split spiral shell on which his mind comes to rest on several occasions (*FLW*, 178-9, 181, 205, 253, 289), to be convinced that the evolutionist trajectory from the Victorian era to existentialism is in bitter contention with the involutive scheme which clings to this hero from a moribund species belonging to a declining society, who is more a passive victim manipulated by the narrator-writer (including as Sarah Woodruff, who ‘chooses’ for him) than an active craftsman of his own fate (*FLW*, 128), and is ready to revert to an animal state if one compares with the raptly contemplative pages which, in Chapter Five of *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard dedicated to the shell and its fantastical spirals, animality’s ‘original vortex’ and ‘coiling vital principle’.<sup>46</sup>

‘Involution’ is a term employed in biology to designate a transformation through degenerative regression, and in botany to characterize an inward redeployment: ‘involute’ or ‘involute’ is used for leaves whose two longitudinal halves curl inward and for shells whose whorls wind closely round the axis, nearly or wholly concealing it. ‘[S]ublime subjects of contemplation for the mind’, writes Bachelard, quoting the Abbé de Vallemont,<sup>47</sup> shells can conjure up the literary motif of the *regressus in infinitum* which, in ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’ (1967), dealing with the paradoxical possibility of a literary renewal afforded by the quasi-apocalyptic acknowledgement of an exhaustion of literary forms in the 1960s, US novelist-critic John Barth selects as the ‘image of the exhaustion, or attempted exhaustion, of [literary] possibilities’, the architectural motif (for instance, in Jorge Luis Borges, Barth’s model) of the story-within-the-story turned inside out, a technical counterpart for the ‘original’ reversal of the feeling of exhaustion of novelistic forms.<sup>48</sup> Going beyond the mere specularly of modernist *mise en abyme*, which believes in its ability to take itself successfully as its own object of reflection, this device would be properly sublime, because undisclosable as such, yet efficient, the central axis of any truly postmodern fiction. Against the belief in the evolutionist progress of literary forms inhabiting humanistic consciousness (wrong-footed and turned inside out by Fowles), the

<sup>45</sup> Günter Grass, *From the Diary of a Snail*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 5, 41.

<sup>46</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, foreword by John R. Stilgoe (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 105-35 [106]. The somewhat hackneyed image of the indestructible ‘shell-house’ (Bachelard, 121, 130), in which Charles would shrivel up, can be connected to the mimicry of surfaces – of feeling ‘in safety under cover of a color’ – described further as what carries ‘the tranquility of inhabiting to the point of culmination, not to say, imprudence’ since ‘[s]hade, too, can be inhabited’ (Bachelard, 132).

<sup>47</sup> Bachelard, 118.

<sup>48</sup> John Barth, *The Literature of Exhaustion and The Literature of Replenishment* (Northridge, CA: Lord John Press, 1982), 1-17 [13-14]. In his ‘Notes on an Unfinished Novel’, Fowles also alludes to this exaggerated consensus of a premature death of the novelistic genre: ‘Ever since I began writing *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* I’ve been reading obituaries of the novel; a particularly gloomy one came from Gore Vidal in the December 1967 issue of *Encounter*.’ (149) See also, in John Barth’s fiction, the recurrent image of the crustacea, which grows while excreting a backward spiral, briefly analysed by Charles B. Harris, in connection with the temporality of the creative act, in *Passionate Virtuosity: The Fiction of John Barth* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), especially 165.

device of infinite involutive regression – like the snail in its shell ‘revolving’ endlessly towards the inside of the gramophone’s microgroove in *Zoo* – might allow us to glimpse at a formalisation of literary becoming from another angle than the now well-trodden endless cyclicity of an imaginary self-regeneration associated to an ana-apocalypics (see n. 15 *supra*), but also, thereby, to the irreversible entropic movement proper to language as a system,<sup>49</sup> according to a dynamics of involution wholly different from that of the passage from the heterogenous to the homogenous, the diverse to the same, the multiple to the One.

## Return: The Psittacism of Writing in *Flaubert’s Parrot*

And the Parrot... (*FP*, 187)

In Chapter Seven (‘Cross Channel’, a hint at Barnes’s parodic borrowings from French criticism, especially Roland Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’; *FP*, 88), the narrator tackles the unmistakable model of the double (or triple) ‘pseudo-open’ ending which supposedly offers the reader a choice and more freedom in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* in order to deflate the mythical trust in the mimetic power of artistic processes which claim to reproduce and stage more authentically Life’s multiple valences while toning down, or even erasing, its radical difference from fiction:

[...] the assumed divinity of the nineteenth-century novelist was only ever a technical device, and the partiality of the modern novelist is just as much a ploy. [...] When the writer provides two different endings to his novel (why two? why not a hundred?), does the reader seriously imagine he is being ‘offered a choice’ and that the work is reflecting life’s variable outcomes? Such a ‘choice’ is never real, because the reader is obliged to consume both endings. In life, we make a decision – or a decision makes us [see *FLW*, 128] – and we go one way; had we made a different decision [...], we would have been elsewhere. The novel with two endings doesn’t reproduce this reality: it merely takes us down two diverging paths. It’s a form of cubism, I suppose. And that’s all right; but let’s not deceive ourselves about the artifice involved. (*FP*, 89)

Barnes/the narrator follows this denunciation with his ‘solution’ to the problem of artificiality and inauthenticity – although it could be argued that, while the gimmicky ploy is meant to live up to the fact that Life does not offer a rewind and a replay, nor does Life label in advance the selection of fates it might have in store for us to draw from:

After all, if novelists truly wanted to simulate the delta of life’s possibilities, this is what they’d do. At the back of the book would be a set of sealed envelopes in various colours. Each would be clearly marked on the outside: Traditional Happy Ending; Traditional Unhappy Ending; Traditional Half-and-Half Ending; Deus ex Machina; Modernist Arbitrary Ending; End

<sup>49</sup> For a complementary conception of literature as revolution, rather than following the curve of a smooth evolution, battling with its experimental leaps against the entropic sclerosis of artistic creation, see Yevgeny Zamyatin’s epoch-making essay ‘On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters’ (1923), in *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin*, ed. and trans. Mirra Ginsburg (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 107-12. Although Zamyatin’s essay has in its sights the more comfortable, ‘bourgeois’ notion of a continuous evolutionist progress, it can be read as anticipating Moretti’s theses in ‘On Literary Evolution’ (mentioned above) on the necessity to conceive literary-historical evolution and artistic creation no longer in terms of the transmission of spontaneously perfect literary products but, from an original field of co-existing possibilities among which a selection must then be operated (the novel with its many beginnings in the eighteenth century, before its relative homogenisation in the following century, then the new experimental surge in the twentieth century), but more like a succession of monstrous creations departing from the aesthetic norms and solutions of a given period.

of the World Ending; Cliffhanger Ending; Dream Ending; Opaque Ending; Surrealist Ending; and so on. You would be allowed only one, and would have to destroy the envelopes you didn't select. That's what I call offering the reader a choice of endings; but you may find me quite unreasonably literal-minded. (*FP*, 89)

'Pure' mimesis, if it existed, should have an aesthetic duty to (re)produce such impossible effects of 'choice', or rather of limitation of our free will – and yet it would still be nothing but the ultimate fictional stratagem. Instead, there remains only writing's 'dumb' psittacism, its parrotry as parody, with the writer-as-parrot always looking for a 'posthumous parthenogenesis' (*FP*, 22; also 82, about the illusion of language's mimetic power):

Félicité + Loulou = Flaubert? [...] You could say that the parrot, representing clever vocalisation without much brain power, was Pure Word. If you were a French academic, you might say that he was *un symbole du Logos*. Being English, I hasten back to the corporeal: to that svelte, perky creature I had seen at the Hôtel-Dieu, I imagined Loulou sitting on the other side of Flaubert's desk and staring back at him like some taunting reflection from a funfair mirror. No wonder three weeks of its parodic presence caused irritation. Is the writer much more than a sophisticated parrot?

Loulou's inability to do more than repeat at second hand the phrases he hears is an indirect confession of the novelist's own failure. The parrot/writer feebly accepts language as something received, imitative and inert. (*FP*, 18, 19)

The parrot which Braithwaite is in search of is not even a 'real' parrot but a stuffed animal, taxidermized – or, as one deceptively says in French, '*naturalisé*' – a 'straw parrot' which is, to the very essence of the thing, or 'idea of parrothood' (*FP*, 184), what the facsimile of humans' idle speech, with its paltry reduplicating ability, to the Logos or the spiritual essence and to the 'meaning of Life'.<sup>50</sup> That the quest's apparent object, at once plural and serial (fifty parrots, 'boiled down' to three likely candidates on the final page of the novel), be what I would like to call a 'real stuffed parrot' emphasizes the two levels on which the parodic psittacism of the mimetic, imitative process operates: 1° the ultimate meaning to be imparted to existence (including fictional existence) will never be able to be hemmed in by any semiotic process whatsoever; 2° this intrinsic inadequacy is itself relayed here by (the writing of) an (auto)biothanatographical quest taking as object and model a 'parrot/writer' (*FP*, 151: 'Gustave imagined he was a wild beast [...] but perhaps he was really just a parrot.') who himself took as model for one of his tales a stuffed parrot, thus one which was incapable of repeating others' words. Geoffrey Braithwaite, the narrator-doctor, whose initials are a cross between Gustave Flaubert (whose own father was a head surgeon; *FP*, 14) and the cuckolded husband and doctor Charles Bovary, turns out to be himself a 'real stuffed parrot' of sorts among so many possible others, ultimately in quest for himself while trying to use the decoy of a literary-critical quest to hold at bay the painful awareness that his life has perhaps been nothing more than a parrot-like replica of the life lived by Emma Bovary's dull husband. A solitary parrot who would copy a widowed ox (*Bovary*): this sounds like the telephone which imitates the cry of other telephones in an early passage which also evokes the stuffed parrots (*FP*, 18-19). Analogous to the sealed envelopes of a plural, lifelike novelistic ending which would pretend to mime the nature of Life's always unique, irreversible choices, these stuffed parrots are even parodies of parodies, since in

<sup>50</sup> About the taxidermy of animals, in which the young Darwin dabbled before developing his evolutionist theories, Norris notes that it testifies to a negation of animality and of natural singularity, which are thus subordinated to the representation of cultural-scientific specimens (15).

both cases the many possibilities remain in an unaccomplished, virtual state: it is highly improbable that any of three shortlisted parrots be the one which Flaubert borrowed and which inspired him with Loulou.

With its falsely singular title, *Flaubert's Parrot* does not offer a choice of denouements but merely suspends the solution to the enigma – 'It was an answer and not an answer; it was an ending, and not an ending' (*FP*, 189) – through an inconclusive ruse which conveniently reduplicates the absence of verdict in the case of Braithwaite's decision to end his wife's life and suffering: induced euthanasia or downright murder (*FP*, 168). These stuffed parodic parrots – also the generic miscegenations practised by the Protean narrator-writer as so many *borrowed plumes* to be gruesomely contrasted with the *borrowed time* of the reprieved wife on artificial life support – propose a disturbing reflection on the ceaselessly fleeting nature of imitation and parody, of mimesis as essentially parodic, in terms of quasi-'clinical', transgeneric experimentations.<sup>51</sup> And it is in this doubling of the parodic or the mimetic on itself, not so much self-reflexively but according to a regressive device triggering reflection or speculation (*FP*, 97: 'How easy it is to set off speculation'; from Latin *speculum*: mirror), that the 'essence' of the renewal of postmodern fiction, in particular in its representational mainsprings, might reside. A mimesis at (at least) a second degree of removal, regression and involution, therefore, or a psittacist parody of parrotry, itself parodic, etc. The naïve belief in the imitative power of a parrot-language is trodden underfoot by showing that it would lead to a merely iterative, mechanical use of words. A parrot ceaselessly absorbed into a deflected parrot-within-the-parrot, which eventually makes it possible to dismiss mimesis unceremoniously by saying: *stuff the parrot!*

Let us return, by way of an un-Flaubertian assumption of *bêtise* in the act of concluding, to 'The Flaubert Bestiary', especially to the entry on 'THE PARROT'. The novel recalls that, among the thousands of press cuttings Flaubert collected for possible inclusion in the dossier of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, there is the 'true' story of one Henri K–, who, after his wife's demise, developed a morbid fixation on his parrot, which could repeat the name of his lost love a hundred times a day. After the bird's death, the lonely widower 'became more and more wrapped up in himself' and 'began to believe that he himself had turned into a parrot': 'As if in imitation of the dead bird, he would squawk out the name he loved to hear' (*FP*, 58). This precedent of a 'real' news item, stranger than fiction can be, is itself the 'first' elaboration of the 'real straw parrot' in the novel, at once fascinating on account of its illusory mimetic powers but also stuffed dead, because shrivelled up on its inter-intratextual self-fascination (the clipping from *L'Opinion nationale* of 20 June 1863 operates as a possible inter-intratextual parrot in *Flaubert's Parrot*), the product of animal taxidermy as much as that of the taxidermy of literary-critical genres and taxonomies. Towards the end of the rubric, the doctor-writer searching for a way of transcending the trauma of his past conjures up this parrot missing on its perch which Frédéric catches sight of in one of the scenes of *L'Éducation sentimentale*:

It isn't so different, the way we wander through the past. [...] Then we see a house; a writer's house, perhaps. There is a plaque on the front wall. 'Gustave Flaubert, French writer, 1821-1880, lived here while –' [...] A parrot's perch catches the eye. We look for the parrot. Where is the parrot? We still hear its voice; but all we can see is a bare wooden perch. The bird has flown. (*FP*, 60)

<sup>51</sup> The phrase 'trans-generic prose text' can be found in James B. Scott, 'Parrot as Paradigms: Infinite Deferral of Meaning in *Flaubert's Parrot*', *Ariel* 21.3 (1990): 58.

And then towards the end of the novel, the ‘solution’ which is not one, because it is more than one: the way back to several parrots, hence the compromise of the ‘real stuffed parrot’ which mediates between the ‘objective’ quest-fiction and the inevitable return of/to the subjective autobio(thanato)graphy, between originality and repetition, with generic parrotry as parody twisting mimesis into self-abolition. Literature as the quest for the so-called ‘evolution’ of literature would be like this half-real, half-stuffed parrot, without a unique origin, at the ‘end’ of a novel which, not unlike Fowles’s – albeit more discreetly thematically since it is deflected by the object which haunts the protagonist’s generico-auto-bio-thanato-graphical quest – struggles for the survival of literature to the ceaselessly restaged trauma of the loss of an origin(al) and of originarity.

Towards the middle of the novel, the narrator confesses: ‘Three stories contend within me. One about Flaubert, one about Ellen, one about myself.’ (*FP*, 85-6), each of these competing *petits récits* being susceptible of being pegged to one of the three selected parrots. Literature as the struggle for a story to be told, the one selected story which would ensure the cohesive unity of the work. A possible definition of the evolution of the novel towards modernism, then towards postmodernism might imply regarding literary production from the angle of the various attempts, increasingly foregrounding their problematisation, to revert to the sacrificed multivalence of History, mourning the loss of the plural origin from before the division and whose traumatic disappearance, made necessary by the conditions of the Darwinian evolution of storytelling, of the finality of history-as-narration, would be felt right into the denouement. At the origin of literature there would have been, already and too late, the monstrous, apocalyptic loss of difference, which each work, a lacunary part for an incomplete whole, strives to palliate while lamenting its radical disappearance.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> The ‘final word’ and note should be left to Hélène Cixous, who insistently repeats that she always writes around a desired/promised, therefore unreachable and unwritable/unwritten ‘book’. See, for example, Frédéric-Yves Jeannet et al., ‘The Book That You Will Not Write: An Interview with Hélène Cixous’, *New Literary History* 37.1: ‘Hélène Cixous: When the Word Is a Stage’ (2006): 249-61; Hélène Cixous, ‘The Book I Don’t Write’, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic, *Parallax* 13.3 (2007): 9-30, and *Chapitre Los* (Paris: Galilée, 2013), Cixous’s own ‘book of los[s]’ whose ‘Author’s Note’ begins: ‘This book is a chapter from *The-Book-That-I-Do-Not-Write*. [...] There is a book which I called *The-Book-That-I-Do-Not-Write*, which I have been dreaming of for more than thirty years’ (translation mine).

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## Zo(o)grafii. „Evoluții” darwiniene ale bestiarului ficțional

### Rezumat

Articolul evaluează teoriile evoluționiste ale lui Darwin, mai ales conceptele cheie referitoare la adaptare, selecție naturală și supraviețuirea celui mai puternic, prin interpretarea unor intrigi și ficțiuni (câteva dintre ele ficțiuni animale legate tematic de *Arca lui Noe*) care privesc evoluția, trauma, adaptabilitatea, mimetismul/ mimesis-ul și supraviețuirea: *Papagalul lui Flaubert* și *O istorie a lumii în 10 capitole și jumătate* ale lui Julian Barnes, romanul lui Timothy Findley *Not Wanted on the Voyage* [*Nedorit în călătorie*], romanul lui Robert Kroetsch *The Studhorse Man* [*Omul armăsar*] și romanul lui John Fowles *Iubita locotenentului francez*. Țesând argumentul critic cu referințe la câteva dintre reflecțiile lui Derrida – despre imposibilitatea unei origini pure, proximitatea dintre început și poruncă [*commencement and commandment*], logica obsecvenței [*obsequence*], sau relația dintre *a fi* și *a urma* [*je suis*], aplicate deconstructiv la ierarhia tradițională dintre uman și animal, maestru și monstru, logos și *bêtise*, etc. – ‘Zo(o)grafii’ se structurează printr-o serie de tablouri, bestiare și inseturi interconectate (*Curcubeul gravitației* al lui Thomas Pynchon și *Glas* al lui Jacques Derrida). Decurgând din evocația inițială a filmului cu tematică vermeeriană al lui Peter Greenaway *A Zed & Two Noughts* [Un z și doi zero], care introduce semantica dublă a verbului *zographiein*: a picta din viață, și *zoon*: animal, semantică discret operațională pe parcursul analizei, studiul în final va încerca să reformuleze problematica evoluției literaturii și a formelor literare ca involuție și regresie.