

The Biological Unconscious, Memory and Identity in Charles Fernyhough's *A Box of Birds*

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Abstract

This essay proposes to critically engage with dominant materialist and narrative models of human identity, addressing the old, 'tired' question of subjectivity from a twenty-first century perspective. Drawing on contemporary neuroscientific theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, I aim to read Charles Fernyhough's *A Box of Birds* (2012) as a creative reflection on the nature of memory, consciousness and the unconscious. As I shall demonstrate, what lies at the heart of Fernyhough's reflection is the Platonic allegory of the mind as an aviary. Taken up and re-interpreted by different characters in the novel, this allegory permits Fernyhough to experiment with contemporary discourses of neuro-subjectivity, tracing a richer, more dynamic relation among mind, brain and body.

Keywords: Charles Fernyhough, forms of neuro-subjectivity, materialism, narrative models of identity, memory, consciousness, the biological unconscious, Jacques Lacan, Plato

I Am No One

In Charles Fernyhough's second novel, titled *A Box of Birds*, two contemporary and, to all appearances, competing assumptions about the human subject are juxtaposed and equally interrogated. The materialist assumption, based on the latest findings of neuroscientific research, projects the subject as 'a bunch of neural systems doing their own thing. A billion little cortical implants, each as mindless as each other'.¹ By contrast, the second assumption (drawing on postmodern narrative theory and versions of social constructionism) approaches the self as a bunch of stories, the narratives imposed on or invented by a culturally and linguistically-situated subject.² Irrespective of their

¹ Charles Fernyhough, *A Box of Birds* (London: Unbound, 2012), 211. Hereafter *ABB* with page references in the text. For different versions of this assumption see, for example, Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Scribner, 1994), Joseph LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Penguin, 2002), Michael Gazzaniga, *The Ethical Brain: The Science of Our Moral Dilemmas* (New York: Dana Press, 2005), Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans., introduction C. Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

² The work of Paul Ricoeur is most important in this context. See, in particular, his *Oneself as Another* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Other indicative works that depend on narrative paradigms to address questions of the self are: Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding*, ed. George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), Mark Philip

differences, both models of human subjectivity converge on the conviction that, beneath the network of neural activity or the diverse stories that produce the distinctly human illusion of ‘me-ness’, ‘I’ am ‘no one’. (ABB, 14-15) In *A Box of Birds* Fernyhough sets out to critically reflect on this conviction, which is reiterated like a mantra no less in academic than in popular venues today. Raising the question of human subjectivity anew from a 21st century perspective, he lets the question resonate with a multiplicity of contexts, from Descartes’ disembodied cogito to Antonio R. Damasio’s recent take on ‘Descartes’ Error’³ and from the Socratic exhortation to ‘Know Thyself’ to Freud’s own famous admonishment: *Wo es war, soll Ich warden*.

My aim in this essay is to focus on Fernyhough’s recasting of a Platonic allegory, namely, the allegory of the mind as an aviary,⁴ in his attempt to rethink the nature of memory and human consciousness. As I shall argue, the paradigm of the aviary, taken up and re-interpreted by different characters in Fernyhough’s novel, invites us, not only to conceptualize consciousness as embrained⁵ and embodied, but also to expand our understanding of the unconscious in ways that enable us to approach it as *more* than an exclusively mental phenomenon. Drawing on François Ansermet and Pierre Magistretti’s *Biology of Freedom*,⁶ I will suggest that, according to Fernyhough, learning to care for what might be described as a species of endangered wildlife appears to be one of the sources of singularity and freedom we still have as *speaking* beings; that is, as beings occupying the ambiguous juncture between biology and culture, living matter and signifier.

A Box of Birds: The Disembodied Soulless Brain

Plato’s *Theaetetus* is an inquiry into the nature and possibility of knowledge. In this dialogue, Socrates’ main interlocutor is Theaetetus, a young student of geometry, who seeks to find the true definition of knowledge. The allegory of the aviary is a heuristic tool Socrates uses to demonstrate the difficulty of distinguishing knowledge from false opinion and the risks entailed in all assumptions that one actually possesses knowledge. In Socrates’ exposition, the aviary unfolds as a model for the human mind. When we are children, the aviary is empty. It is through learning that it gradually fills up. Predictably enough, for Socrates learning is described as a continuous chase after all sorts of wild

Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1993), Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), Stanton Wortham, *Narratives in Action: A Strategy for Research and Analysis* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), Olav Bryant Smith, *Myths of the Self: Narrative Identity and Postmodern Metaphysics* (Rowman and Littlefield: Lexington Books, 2004), Kim Atkins, *Narrative Identity and Moral Identity: A Practical Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2008), Constance DeVereaux and Martin Griffin, *Narrative, Identity, and the Map of Cultural Policy: Once Upon a Time in a Globalized World* (London: Routledge, 2016), Jack J. Bauer, *Narrative Identity and the Good Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³ Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon Books, 1994). Hereafter *DE* with page references in the text.

⁴ Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. John McDowell, intr. and ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵ This is a term used in *DE*, 118.

⁶ François Ansermet and Pierre Magistretti, *Biology of Freedom: Neural Plasticity, Experience, and the Unconscious*, trans. Susan Fairfield (London: Karnac, 2007). Hereafter *BF* with page references in the text.

birds. As he tells Theaetetus, this chase is of two kinds: 'one before one has come to possess a thing, in order to get possession of it, and the other when one possesses it, in order to get hold of what one has possessed for some time and have it in one's hands'. This point leads Socrates to make an important distinction between 'to possess' and 'to have' knowledge, for, as he explains, though the owner of the aviary has the birds in his power, he does not truly 'have' them unless he can catch and hold them in his hands.⁷ At first glance, this appears like a reiteration of Plato's anamnestic theory of knowledge,⁸ the theory, in other words, that human beings are born in possession of knowledge (like the owner of the aviary possesses the trapped birds). In order to 'have' and be able to use the knowledge we possess we, like the owner of the birds, need to chase after them anew, call and coax them to return to our hands. Yet, in the *Theaetetus* things are a bit more complicated, given that, as the young student himself acknowledges, in the aviary there are also 'mock birds',⁹ that is, forms of ignorance. We need, then, to be able to distinguish between the different kinds of birds and remain alert to the possibility that, despite years of chase, we may find ourselves empty-handed.

In Fernyhough's novel Gareth is a young student of neuroscience who, like Theaetetus, is driven by a quest for truth. To Gareth, the Platonic allegory can help us produce a materialist model on the basis of which the mind is simply 'a lucky by-product' of the brain, 'a network of bioelectrical systems which has somehow managed to convince itself that it is conscious' (*ABB*, 5; 180). According to him, Plato's uncanny brilliance lies in his presentation of perceptions, thoughts, and memories *not* as the precious immaterial substance of 'someone in control up there', but as 'inscrutable life forms flitting around' and forming their own 'amazingly complicated patterns' (*ABB*, 57). This serves to release human beings of any remaining illusions of coherence and agency, opening up the path to a form of mindless, care-free, material happiness:

You could absolve yourself of all freewill and responsibility. You could let your life be entirely controlled by the collective behavior of creatures who hadn't the slightest interest in that life. [...] You could enter a universe ruled by completely different laws, where your every movement would be determined by the decision-making powers of fundamentally different life forms. Instead of thinking a thought or making a decision, you could just wait for a bird. (*ABB*, 57)

Clearly, Gareth has transformed Socrates' heuristic narrative, which is abandoned as inadequate to offer a definition of knowledge in the course of the dialogue, into the paradigmatic image of the soulless brain going about its own business. What is more, he reinterprets Socrates' famous aphorism ('Know Thyself') as an injunction to know your

⁷ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 198d (90); 199a (91).

⁸ For an analysis and (re)appraisal of Plato's theory of knowledge as anamnesis see, for example, R. E. Allen, 'Anamnesis in Plato's *Meno* and *Phaedo*', *The Review of Metaphysics* 13.1 (September 1959): 165-174 and Dominic Scott, 'Platonic Anamnesis Revisited', *The Classical Quarterly* 37.2 (December 1987): 346-66.

⁹ This is a term used by Benjamin Jowett in his 'Introduction and Analysis', to Plato's *Theaetetus*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol IV, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892, 141. In his own commentary on *Theaetetus*, Seth Benardette writes: 'Nonknowledge is such a good mimic of knowledge that it induces in its possessor the belief it is knowledge. Nonknowledge is a decoy, but it could not be a decoy unless it had borrowed some of the plumage of knowledge and therefore in a sense is knowledge'. See *Plato's Theaetetus: Part I of The Being of the Beautiful*, trans. Seth Benardette (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), I. 167.

birds by learning to speak their language: ‘Understand your aviary, man! Take control of your life, just by letting go of this ridiculous idea of *you*. [...] Get to know your birds. Your thoughts, your memories, the bioelectrical happenings that make you what you are. Learn how to make them come to you’ (*ABB*, 57, emphasis in the original). As he understands it, this process of self-knowledge involves developing an AI map replicating the workings of the brain. When he finds out that such a map (called the Lorenzo Circuit) is already in the process of being produced by neuroscientists in his university, he steals the mapping data, aiming to create his own aviary, where each bird will carry a piece of the data, forming a live network to which he intends to be virtually connected. This is, in fact, the event that sets the suspense plot off, launching a chase after Gareth and the stolen brain-mapping data. This chase is a reenactment of the Platonic quest to ‘possess’ knowledge and serves to bring closer together Dr. Yvonne Churcher, Gareth’s teacher and the protagonist of Fernyhough’s novel, and James, who is Yvonne’s object of desire as well as her key antagonist.

As the only intrafictional narrator in the novel, Yvonne is the limited consciousness through which we witness events and perceive all the other characters. She is a young neuroscientist working on a cure for Alzheimer’s, a research project she is strongly committed to, due to her close relationship with Effi, an old woman suffering from this degenerative disease. Like Gareth, she has a materialist view of human subjectivity, though (in contrast to him) this view is not a source of happiness for her but the index of an emotional numbness, an overwhelming sense of emptiness enhanced by a recent failed relationship with another neuroscientist. As Yvonne never tires to reiterate, she has lost the ‘feeling of being centred, that X that’s supposed to mark the spot of the soul’ (*ABB*, 13). It is not simply that she doubts the reality of what she calls a ‘mythical centre’ but, more importantly, she doubts ‘the “I” that’s supposed to be doing the doubting’, Descartes’ remaining solid ground for affirming the *cogito*’s existence: ‘I use this word’, she explains, ‘this feathery personal pronoun, like you might say the name of a foreign town you’re headed for but have never actually seen, hoping the act of utterance might bring it closer. But I don’t believe in that town. I never did. The feeling of centredness, of me-ness, that is supposed to keep you rooted in your life: well, it passed me by’ (*ABB*, 14). Yvonne refers to herself as a ‘deluded meat puppet’, a ‘zombie girl’, ‘an empty box’, a ‘blind machine’ (*ABB*, 14; 48; 222; 226). Not even her body can offer her an anchor point, a material basis on which to build the edifice of a self and a durable sense of ‘hereness’. Her encounter with Gareth, who trusts and looks up to her, will force her out of her emotional numbness and will bring out of her the ‘churcher’ she promises to be (*ABB*, 242). At the same time, her relationship with another student, James, will help her unravel the stitches making up her story, allowing her wounds to breathe.

The Story-telling Sewing Machine

Contemporary neuroscientific research is increasingly abandoning models that represent the brain as a disembodied machine or a software program, embracing what Damasio calls an ‘organismic perspective’, that is, a comprehensive understanding of the brain as embodied and in constant interplay with its physical and social environment (*DE*, 252). As Damasio argues, the ‘physiological operations that we call mind are derived from the structural and functional ensemble rather than from the brain alone [...]. The soul breathes through the body’ (*DE*, xvii). This perspective has enabled brain scientists to confirm that

lived experience (including the experience of different bodily states) leaves traces on the neuronal network, which produce and modify the synapses transferring information between neurons and affecting the becoming of the subject. Due to the plasticity of the neuronal network, this operation of inscription-connection-inscription-modification of connection is continuous throughout a person's life and is seen as the basis of the neural self or, to quote Damasio, the 'third-party view' that 'constitutes, moment by moment, a nonverbal narrative document of what is happening' to an 'organism in the act of perceiving and responding to an object' (*DE*, 243).

If the neural self is the constantly updated version of the diverse connections among synaptic traces and somatic states, the autobiographical self is equally perceived in terms of connections, those bringing together bodily charged representations of synaptic inscriptions through the mechanism of memory. In his analysis of new developments in memory studies Fernyhough argues that we need to give up the view that memories are 'mental DVDs stored away in some library of the mind'.¹⁰ According to him, the process of remembering is reconstructive and always 'happens in the present tense' (*PL*, 7-8). It involves different cognitive and neural systems, stitching together disparate images, fragments of experiences, and somatic states, thus creating a (more or less) coherent story which permits us to harbor the illusion of a self 'unfolding through time' (*PL*, 9). 'More than anything', he writes, 'memory is a great storyteller. Not only do we stretch our narrative capacities to the limit when we construct an autobiographical memory, but we also eagerly spin tales whenever our memories leave us with gaps in the record' (*PL*, 21). As William Hirstein shows in his study of different forms of the confabulation syndrome,¹¹ filling in gaps is one 'of the brain's primary functions' in its attempt 'to make sense of the world'. He adds: 'The brain has a proclivity to smooth over the rough edges and ignore certain details so as not to lose the big picture'.¹² The brain's plasticity, therefore, its ability to make and modify synaptic connections, seems to lie at the root of the human propensity to tell stories. According to Daniel Dennett, these stories constitute our 'fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition' and aim to 'posit a unified agent', 'a center of narrative gravity'.¹³

In this light, Yvonne's conviction in *A Box of Birds* that 'I' is 'an illusion', the 'confection of a restless, pattern-seeking brain' seems correct (*ABB*, 46). If, taking up Plato's allegory again, 'I' am a box of birds, this box can be configured anew as a story-telling sewing machine: the trapped birds entangled in thick, colorful threads and compulsively weaving odd, changing patterns as they fly around in response to a stimulus or in confusion. Hence Yvonne's deeper appreciation of the Platonic distinction between to 'possess' and to 'have'. Unlike Gareth, she knows we cannot 'have' or control 'the wildlife' we may think we possess: 'I don't have thoughts; they have me. Processes you don't understand, shaping consciousness, making the flesh-and-blood machine think and feel, billions of numb reflexes fashioning a mind out of data' (*ABB*, 226, 227). This is why she remains suspicious of scientific attempts to map the connections that make us

¹⁰ Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light: The New Science of Memory* (London: Profile Books, 2013), 7. Hereafter *PL* with page references in the text.

¹¹ These include Korsakoff's syndrome (telling stories to fill in the gaps of memory), anosognosia, the split-brain syndrome, 'Anton's syndrome (denial of blindness), Capgras' syndrome (the illusion that an impostor has replaced a person close to the patient), and schizophrenia'. See William Hirstein, *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 2-3.

¹² Hirstein, 6.

¹³ Quoted by Hirstein, 5.

who we are. In her view, the Lorenzo Circuit may promise to tell a convincing story about the ‘deep root-system of the self’, but it remains ‘a dream of connectedness’, challenging us ‘to be more whole’ than we actually are (*ABB*, 6-7). While Gareth perceives scientific mapping practices (i.e. neuro-imaging or the Lorenzo Circuit) as an attempt to arrive at a material form of wisdom, Yvonne sees mapping as a cog in the story-telling sewing machine, one that keeps the stitching going even when the story is half-wrong: ‘does the bit that’s right make you more likely to trust the bit that’s wrong?’, she asks, reiterating Theaetetus’ own concern over the difficulty to tell the difference between the wildlife of ever-elusive knowledge and the mock birds of our phantasies and epistemological presumptions (*ABB*, 174-5).

Despite his obsession with truth and his projection of himself as the tortured hero of a quest for self-knowledge, James turns out to be just such a mock bird. At the beginning, he is presented as the main antagonist of Gareth and Yvonne’s materialist perspective. An animal rights activist, member of a community of ex-suicides brought together by a slippery figure named David Overstrand, James challenges Yvonne’s determination not to fall into any of the traps of subjectivity: ‘You’re a materialist. You want to believe there’s nothing more to us than networks of nerve cells. But if you want to do that, you’ve got to explain how you’re going to live your life. Where does your moral sense come from? What are you going to do about love, and compassion, and humanity? Or are they just molecules as well?’ (*ABB*, 165). To Yvonne’s rejection of a centre, a ‘focus that could correspond to a soul’, he juxtaposes the hard core of an essence – to be discovered, according to him, in the story of his failed suicide at Bankstown Underpass, the place where David allegedly found him. James uses Bankstown Underpass as the index of an unspeakable trauma, the irrevocable causality that has shaped his narrative and made him the way he is (*ABB*, 204; 151). As he tells Yvonne, Bankstown Underpass is not just another story, but ‘the truth that makes the stories true’ (*ABB*, 171). This is, in fact, the deterministic outlook he shares with the other members of his community – all named after the sites of their trauma.¹⁴ Together, they weave one story after another, each time inventing anew the topographies of what compulsively returns as the nucleus of the self, the immutable ‘soul underneath’: ‘You can’t be bigger than your own story’, James insists. ‘We can’t help the things that make us what we are. But we can try and face them’ (*ABB*, 234; 238).

Paradoxically, James seeks to face his traumatic experiences by using stories to avert his gaze from what he posits as the blinding center of the self. In an attempt at self-confession, he writes to Yvonne that he has been playing a game of ‘hide-and-seek [...] with the real James’ (*ABB*, 234). Hence, Yvonne’s overwhelming sense that he seems to be acting a part: ‘I stare at the streaming light-show of his profile, the fleeting Jameses that take on human form and then blink out’ (*ABB*, 221). Yet not even Yvonne (cautious and ever-suspicious) is prepared for the final turn of events. As she finds out, Bankstown Underpass and David Overstrand are convenient fairy tales (*ABB*, 243). Beneath the layers of stories he has woven for himself (‘The failed suicide. The guy with the guilt. The man with the trauma he can’t speak about’), James appears to be empty: ‘As he starts laying out the threads of another story, I realise that he’s proving me right. It’s not what’s beneath the layers, it’s the fact that the layers are there at all. He’s like me, in that respect. The layers are what he is.’ (*ABB*, 251; 165) Not only is James’ traumatic center ‘a lie that

¹⁴ For example, Grandstand, Level Ten and Bridge, their names referring to specific sites in Pelton, the places where (based on their stories) they attempted to commit suicide.

reveals nothing but lies', but he also turns out to be working for Sansom, the unscrupulous biotech which seeks to possess the brain-mapping data Gareth stole in order to use it for its own dubious ends (*ABB*, 250).

Interestingly, in Fernyhough's *Pieces of Light*, his study of memory, the story-telling sewing machine is not discredited. 'Memory may be a cheat', he writes, 'but it is generally speaking a beneficent one. It works tirelessly for its master' (*PL*, 281). He goes on to emphasize: 'We are all natural-born storytellers; we engage in acts of fiction-making every time we recount an event from our pasts. [...] They might be fictions, but they are *our* fictions, and we should treasure them' (*PL*, 281-2, emphasis in the original). By contrast, in *A Box of Birds* storytelling is far from a benign activity. 'Your cortex has only a part-time interest in the truth', Gillian (the director of the institute where Yvonne works) tells her. 'For the rest of the time it's a deceitful egotist, just wanting to suit its own needs.' (*ABB*, 206-207) Faced with James' hide-and-seek storytelling games, Yvonne herself asks: 'What's left of a man, after you take away his stories?' (*ABB*, 257) The image of the empty box comes up again and again as the resonating answer to this question. When seen in connection to Yvonne, the image stands for her conviction that the story-telling sewing machine is soulless, its workings controlled by material forces that are fundamentally unknowable: 'The birds control this, not me. Whatever I do next, deciding is not part of it. The birds will have their say' (*ABB*, 198).¹⁵ When used to describe James, however, the emptiness of the box becomes a representation of his anti-Socratic function in the novel, that is, his reluctance to know the self, a process which for Socrates, as we witness in *Alcibiades I*,¹⁶ entails a particular attitude of care: i.e. an ongoing examination of one's actions, thoughts, opinions, and feelings, as well as of one's relations with others. This is clearly indicated by James' treatment of the birds whose flight patterns Gareth seeks to know. Watching him unpinning the cages in which Gareth has locked them, Yvonne thinks: 'Look after the birds, the wise men tell us. For James, that always meant letting them go.' (*ABB*, 254)

In this light, it seems it is Yvonne who holds the promise to develop as a Socratic character. She is the one who insists on the impossibility of *having* truth or knowledge (for Socrates, this is the prerogative of the gods), thus acknowledging the need to posit a *μέτρον* (limit and measure) to scientific ambition and to the human greed for control. Yet, like Socrates, Yvonne never negates her responsibility as a committed (re)searcher, one who begins with the examination of the self, seeking to modify the subject's relation to knowing as a process, rather than an object or an end in itself. If she joins the chase for the stolen brain-mapping data, she does so out of concern for Gareth (at times, presented as a vulnerable feathered creature himself) and because she is alert to the stakes behind rival claims on and uses of knowledge (*ABB*, 156; 180).

¹⁵ This feeling Yvonne has is enhanced by her realization towards the end of the novel that, without her knowledge, an implant has been inserted in her brain by Sansom's scientists who seek to find out where Gareth is hiding.

¹⁶ This is a dialogue classified among the contested Platonic works. See Plato, *Alcibiades*, trans and intr. Nicholas Denyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). In 'Technologies of the Self' Michel Foucault insists on the inextricability in Greco-Roman philosophy of the Delphic principle, *gnothi sauton* ('Know yourself'), from *epimelēsthai sautou* (to take care of yourself). He argues that since Plato's *Alcibiades I*, 'one had to be concerned with oneself. One had to occupy oneself with oneself before the Delphic principle was brought into action'. See Michel Foucault, 'Technologies of the Self', in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988), 19-20.

In the course of the chase, Yvonne will come upon a number of obstacles: James' deceitful behaviour, his friends' predatory schemes on her, Sansom's ruthless exploitation of her feelings to serve its own ends, but also her own misrecognition of her desire. These obstacles will make her stumble and fall, endangering her very life and risking to scare away all the birds chirping inside her (*ABB*, 222). In 'The Freudian Unconscious and Ours', Jacques Lacan argues that the obstacle is precisely what doesn't work, that which fails to cohere, the non-sensical element in the narrative woven around a 'cause and that which it affects'.¹⁷ Reflecting on her encounter with James at the end of the novel, Yvonne thinks: 'Behind all the lies there must be something that doesn't trip itself up, make a joke out of its own self-contradiction' (*ABB*, 269). Yet it is this element that trips itself up, the place in the narrative where the stitches have come loose, that leads to what Lacan calls '*the discovery*'. As he explains, this discovery 'has that indefinable something that touches us, [...] namely, *surprise*, that by which the subject finds himself overcome, by which he finds both more and less than he expected' (*FFCP*, 25, emphasis in the original). According to Lacan, what reveals itself to us in the form of the obstacle, the stumble, the discontinuity, the gap, is the unconscious, 'always ready to steal away again', just like the 'twice lost' figure of Eurydice (*FFCP*, 25). Because the unconscious for Lacan emerges in 'that zone of shades' to which Eurydice belongs, its law is the law of the Freudian dream or what he terms the 'play of the signifier' (*FFCP*, 23, 130).

Indeed, Fernyhough's *A Box of Birds* unfolds around two enigmatic signifiers: namely, Gareth's recounting of his childhood memory of a square full of birds in Verona and, as Yvonne realizes at the end of the chase, James: 'That's what all this has been about: finding James' (*ABB*, 250). Her task as a searcher, then, is to 'follow the path of the signifier'.¹⁸ In the process, she will stumble upon 'that which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier', a lack that will force her to come to terms with her condition as a subject, that is her response-ability – to others, but also to that which addresses her in Freud's words: '*Here, in the field of the dream, you are at home. Wo es war, soll ich warden*' (*FFCP*, 44, 270).

Searching for the Signifier: Des*re

For Lacan, the signifier, unlike the trace,¹⁹ is the mark of an absence – the absence of both a signified and a referent. It is also the mark of the cut between nature and culture that transforms the living being into a speaking subject situated within a wider network of signifiers. As he argues, the 'phenomenon of the subject' constitutes itself 'out of the effects of the signifier', that is, its metonymic displacement and substitutability, its chaining function, its barring of the signified (*FFCP*, 126). It is because the subject is 'inhabited by the signifier' that, unlike the Cartesian *cogito*, it is subjected to a causality that eludes it, one emerging (as we have seen) in what punctures its narrative of continuity

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981), 22. Hereafter *FFCP* with page references in the text.

¹⁸ Benvenuto, B. and Kennedy R., quoted by Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 45.

¹⁹ According to Lacan, the trace is what 'the object leaves behind once it has gone off somewhere else'. See *The Psychoses: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book III: 1955-1956, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 167.

and coherence, in other words, the unconscious (*FFCP*, 126).²⁰ As Sean Homer notes, the unconscious in Lacan is the impact 'upon the subject of the trans-individual symbolic order' within which it is situated and, as such, it 'is not biological but is something that *signifies*'.²¹

Yet, in their *Biology of Freedom*, Ansermet and Magistretti insist that contemporary neuroscientific research can help us restore a neglected aspect of the materiality of the Lacanian signifier, i.e. its porosity and susceptibility to bodily sensation.²² In this way, they argue, we would be able to respond to Lacan's own concern with understanding 'how the organism comes to be caught in the dialectic of the subject' (*BF*, 13, note 3), at the same time sketching possible paths to what Freud describes as the unknown territory between the 'two kinds of things' we know about 'our psyche (or mental life): firstly, its bodily organ and scene of action, the brain (or nervous system), and, on the other hand, our acts of consciousness' (Quoted in *BF*, 3).²³ Drawing on Damasio's seminal work, Ansermet and Magistretti suggest that the neglected link between brain and consciousness is the 'body proper' which, interestingly, in *A Box of Birds* Yvonne likens to a 'bridge' (*ABB*, 48). Indeed, it is because synaptic traces are associated with different somatic states, that the mnemonic inscriptions at the root of both our conscious and unconscious life are unpredictable and arbitrary, accounting for the production of each speaking subject as unique or, to quote Ansermet and Magistretti, an 'exception to the universal' (*BF*, 6). As they explain, the synaptic and mnemonic inscriptions of a perception or an experience are far from equivalent. Synaptic inscriptions produced through the mechanisms of plasticity become charged with feelings and the representations of these feelings, which form what we might call 'a body memory' (*BF*, 99). This is why they 'can undergo many reworkings and become associated with other traces, distancing the subject from the event that took place' (*BF*, 45). It is here, in this gap between synaptic and mnemonic trace, that the Lacanian concept of the signifier becomes useful. The signifier, as we have seen, denotes the absence of the event or referent. Its chaining function guarantees neither the retrieval of the event nor the acquisition of its truth or essence. Serving as the index of potentially infinite metonymic connections and displacements, the signifier points to the multiple processes of 'association, fusion, deformation, modification and fragmentation' that take place between inscriptions on different levels of an organism (i.e. the body proper, neural and cognitive systems) and produce a distinct, highly individualized internal reality (*BF*, 46, 211). It therefore epitomizes the point of convergence between 'language in its signifying articulation and living matter' and, hence, between neurobiology and psychoanalysis, throwing into relief 'everything that is at stake in what is peculiar to man as a linguistic being' (*BF*, 84, 176).

²⁰ See also Homer, 48.

²¹ Homer, 69, emphasis in the original.

²² Though Ansermet and Magistretti do not follow this path, this aspect has been unpacked in French Feminist psychoanalytic theory, especially, in Julia Kristeva's development of concepts such as 'the semiotic', 'semanalysis' and 'signifiance'. See, for example, her *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller and intr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). For an astute reclamation of the materiality of the Lacanian signifier see also Robyn Ferrell's 'The Passion of the Signifier and the Body in Theory', *Hypatia* 6.3 (Fall 1991): 172-84, where she insists: 'The unconscious, "structured like a language," that is, ordered through differences, nevertheless incorporates that order at the level of the body' (175).

²³ In Fernyhough's novel, Yvonne refers to this territory as 'the floor the lift doesn't stop at, the uninhabited planet' (*ABB*, 131).

As Fernyhough's *A Box of Birds* shows, the major stake concerns our ability as human beings to develop a durable sense of self that is subjected to a certain (biological or environmental) determinism while remaining unique and unpredictable (*BF*, xvi). Indeed, in *Descartes' Error* Damasio emphasizes that the notion of 'a selfless cognition' is as dangerous as that of 'a central knower and inspector of everything that happens in our minds' (*DE*, 100, 227). Both fallacies, according to him, result from a disembodied understanding of the human brain, the mind and their relationship. As we have noted, it is the continuously updated representation of different body-states that produces Damasio's neural self and serves as the basis for the autobiographical self. It is also the passion-infused instability of the body that, in keeping the brain 'its captive audience', modifies synaptic inscriptions and introduces distance between experience and our representations of experience (*DE*, xv). In *The Biology of Freedom* Ansermet and Magistretti suggest that human freedom emerges in this distance. As they write, the distance from experience created by the mechanisms of plasticity gives a person 'room to move around, an ability to transform himself, to change, to become the author and actor of a process of becoming different from what was programmed by his determinants' (*BF*, 239). It appears, therefore, that contemporary neurobiology confirms one of the basic tenets of psychoanalysis, namely, the view that our freedom is guaranteed not by the assumption of a panoptic 'Cartesian theatre in some part of our brain', but by an originary lack-of-being, a structural loss, the kind of emptiness Yvonne describes so astutely in Fernyhough's novel (*DE*, 227). Following Lacan, it is this *manque-à-être* that mobilizes human desire – the infinite chase for a wildlife that can only provisionally be possessed, perches fleetingly on one's shoulder and escapes anew unless trapped (again fleetingly) in the frail nets of a dream.

In *A Box of Birds* one of the paradigms for desire employed by Fernyhough is the virtual network Yvonne participates in, a network of linked webcams and anonymous gamers that is called 'Des*re' (*ABB*, 7). Organized around a nodal point of absence (i.e. the absence of Yvonne's 'feathery personal pronoun', Freud's 'ich'), this is a network of connections and exchanges among avatars, that is, signifiers used to represent the gamers to other signifiers (*ABB*, 14). As Yvonne tells us, sixteen million people are hooked onto this network, driven by the same sense of lack she experiences and the quest for an elusive something outside of the virtual network but constantly alluded to, indeed, promised by it (*ABB*, 240). 'There's a myth about Des*re', Yvonne confesses. 'When you reach a certain level of connectivity, the experience changes. [...] The virtual takes on the shimmer of the real. It's a moment of intense, vertiginous consciousness, the boost of hereness and nowness that can finally link up all your disconnected moments' (*ABB*, 152). If Yvonne feels 'dangerously exposed' in the context of this network, this is because its workings are fed by such phantasies of wholeness, varied scenarios invented by the gamers to screen the gaping hole of the subject and the stitches that keep together their narratives (*ABB*, 7). Significantly, Yvonne uses Des*re to look for traces of her lost Portuguese lover, Mateus, '[m]y gorgeous, suffering fadista', as she calls him (*ABB*, 18). She also uses this network to connect with Gareth, replaying the narrative he has told her in an attempt to grasp the missing signifier (i.e. his hide-out), which, she will find out, is no other than the signifier of his lack.

In psychoanalysis, fantasy is 'the support of desire' (*FFCP*, 185). As Slavoj Žižek insists, it 'does not simply realize a desire in a hallucinatory way', but 'constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates', mobilizing our investment in a chain of objects

perceived as sharing a set of phantasmatic features.²⁴ This chain remains open because it lacks the signifier that could complete it, namely, the object-cause of desire that eludes the subject but is constitutive of it. In their own analysis of how the distinct internal reality of a subject is produced due to the various mechanisms of distancing from external reality and its initial material inscriptions in the brain, Ansermet and Magistretti also insist on the function of fantasy. 'In hunting for the event', they write, 'we may come upon a fantasy that was constituted in obedience to other laws than those of reality: the laws of unconscious wishes' (*BF*, 42). As a result of the complex transcriptions of experience that take place on different levels of the organism, the memory of an event is mixed with a set of fantasies that become the subject's window onto reality and shape his or her mental life (*BF*, 190). It is because the object-cause of desire that produces this set of fantasies is 'peculiar to the person's history', that the internal life of each subject, his or her unconscious, is unique (*BF*, 123). According to Ansermet and Magistretti, fantasy functions as the synchronic constraint that ruptures 'the diachronic determination' of the subject, 'connected with the inscription of the traces of experience' (*BF*, 190). This is why, they rightly emphasize, the unconscious is not a repressed memory but 'a system of rearranged mnemonic traces that are not a reflection of the external reality that produced them' (*BF*, 216). Therefore, it can neither be localized in particular parts of the brain or in connection with a concrete referent, nor narrativized, that is, reconstituted as 'a chronological narrative': 'At each stage of a person's history', Ansermet and Magistretti explain, 'each stage of development, a synchronic juncture occurs, producing unpredictability and interfering with the story' (*BF*, 189).

This is what James and his group of friends fail to appreciate in their insistence on positing the (exterior or interior) locus of their trauma.²⁵ The storytelling game they indulge in functions in ways similar to the virtual network of Des*re Yvonne is obsessed with. It too is structured around an ensemble of fantasies that serve to fill in the gap where the unconscious makes itself felt, recreating 'a harmony with a real – a real that may well not be determined', as Lacan puts it (*FFCP*, 22). In her search for the truth behind the enigmatic signifier that James is to her, Yvonne follows the thread of his fantasies only to be caught by surprise, as we have said. To go back to Lacan's words, in her chase of the wildlife shaping the pattern of James' trauma, she discovers much *less* than she expects: i.e. one mock bird after another, each vanishing into thin air once taken in her hands, leaving behind it nothing but a desolate emptiness. Yvonne wonders: 'Surely a man's lies will always lead back somewhere, to the facts of his character that are biologically true: the thing itself, not the thing's invention?' (*ABB*, 269). At the same time, in the network of James' fantasies something *more* is revealed to her, namely, the formal consistency of her own desire and the primary signifier that organizes her own fantasy scenarios. This is how she herself describes the sudden discovery:

The forces that carry you resist understanding. The things you want are things you don't even know about. But now and then the light is reconfigured by a hurtling copse of trees, and you catch a glimpse of how the facts are truly aligned. [...] You know no more of this train than the length of this carriage. You could go the whole journey without knowing more. But then the tracks swing around a curve and you see the yellow locomotive, the car transporters and

²⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 7.

²⁵ As I have mentioned, each of these characters names his/her alleged trauma in connection with a particular site in Pelton (e.g. Bankstown Underpass). These sites are then internalized and isolated as the nucleus of their soul: 'You walked a long way. Bankstown Underpass is in Pelton. No, he says, touching his chest, it's in here.' (*ABB*, 157)

freight trucks way out ahead, all the baggage you've been hauling through space, oblivious, all this time. (*ABB*, 232)

The primary signifier in Yvonne's psychic apparatus is that of the zombie girl, the signifier of her lack as a subject and of the sense of loss she reiterates throughout the novel: i.e. the loss of a focus that might give some shape to the diverse connections that make her who she is, the loss of attachment to her body, the loss of faith in a shared symbolic order based on something beyond the chase to possess knowledge: 'I don't need faith', she tells James. 'I look for evidence. Then I believe'. (*ABB*, 171; 204) It is this signifier that organizes her recurrent fantasy, that is, the fantasy of a zombie girl, sleepwalking in the narrative of her own passivity and awakened (again and again) by a dark, wounded man whose face she is unable to see (*ABB*, 25; 59; 125). Rather than the truth of her desire (as she thought when she met him), James is, then, nothing more than a substitutable signifier in a long chain that goes back to her first lover in France. In this light, it is significant that, by the end of the novel, Yvonne succeeds in distancing herself from this determining fantasy, initially in her encounter with Mateus in the context of a conference,²⁶ then in her final confrontation with James: 'When I look back James is gone, like the memory of the thing that woke you, vanished before you can work out what it was' (*ABB*, 258).

In *The Biology of Freedom* Ansermet and Magistretti insist that the 'logic of psychoanalysis is [...] more a logic of response than it is a logic of cause' (*BF*, 239). What is at stake is not identifying a (*the*) cause ('the thing that woke you'), but to change one's response to the set of fantasies that hold one captive. As they argue, being able to recognize the formal frame of consistency that organizes and sustains a subject's desire opens up a space of freedom where the subject can alter his or her relation to the primary signifier, thus breaking the chain that holds together any rigidified fantasies. Indeed, it is in this insight that Gareth's Socratic injunction to 'Know thy birds' acquires any sort of validity in Fernyhough's novel. As we have seen, this knowledge has nothing to do with the Lorenzo Circuit, as Gareth seems to think. It relates, instead, to a painstaking process of self-examination that begins with an acknowledgement of the limits of knowledge and is content to grasp *not* truth but what repeats itself, in other words, the play of the signifier. This is precisely what the first epigraph to the novel suggests:

When you begin to study the warblers you will probably conclude that you know nothing about birds, and can never learn. But if you begin by recognizing their common traits, and then study a few of the easiest, and those that nest in your locality, you will be less discouraged; and when flocks come back at the next migration you will be able to master the oddities of a larger number.²⁷

Similarly, at the end of the chase Yvonne learns to discern the repeated patterns of her migrating fantasies and appreciate the 'oddities' that these fantasies share. As a result, she is able to facilitate the re-motivation of her desire, finding a new love object, Daren, the carer of the Alzheimer's patient whom she loves as a mother. Like Socrates, she comes to embrace her constitutive lack, the realization, in Lacan's words, that the 'need for a

²⁶ When he visits Yvonne in her hotel room, Mateus uses her fantasy in an attempt to win her back. While he is in the process of repeating the familiar narrative, Yvonne interrupts him. "'Wait...'" I push his hand away and jerk my body upright, bumping my cheek against the window. "That's you. It's not me.'" (*ABB*, 129-30).

²⁷ From Florence Merriam's *Birds Through an Opera Glass*, 1889, epigraph to *ABB*.

closed *one*' is a 'mirage' screening the experience of 'the split, of the stroke, of rupture' which characterizes the unconscious (*FFCP*, 26, emphasis in the original). Yet, this realization is no longer experienced as a disabling sense of emptiness, but, on the contrary, it leads Yvonne to the affirmation of a 'hereness' that puts her in connection with her body and others: 'I close my eyes on the light. I push back with my feet and let go. The breeze on my skin, my whole body moving. At the centre of it all, this flicker of knowing. I'm here' (*ABB*, 269). Importantly, Yvonne's retrieval of connectedness with what Damasio calls 'the indispensable frame of reference' for both our brain and mind, that is, her body, helps her accept not only her own lack as a subject but also the lack of the Other, in other words, *science* as the wider symbolic network with which she identified since adolescence (*DE*, xvi). This is why she resigns from her job at the University, for she is no longer willing to invest in the solitary and antagonistic chase for absolute knowledge. True to her Socratic call, she gradually perceives knowing as a collaborative, dialogic process, a 'Con-Science', as her friend Daren puts it (*ABB*, 267). This is how she is able to unravel the suspense plot and solve the puzzle of Gareth's childhood memory. However, she can only do so by returning to where '*ich*' was (the Freudian 'navel of dreams') and by caring enough to remember (*FFCP*, 23).

Churching the Signifier

Dreams play an important part in Yvonne's chase for the signifier and the journey towards self-knowledge she has embarked on. Dreams nourish and restage her primary fantasy, they host and transcribe her desire, they open her up to connections that remain enigmatic nets in which all sorts of wild birds get entangled: her mother in the guise of her vicar-father, Mateus opening a door in her head, Sansom's captured chimps bouncing 'screaming off the walls', James reiterating and reawakening her lack (*ABB*, 59-60). While she is in a dream state, her vision of reality gets attenuated and she is able to observe the 'strange light-show' of the brain from inside, nauseous or fascinated at the 'kaleidoscope of object shapes' (*ABB*, 60). Dreams do not return Yvonne to a forgotten or lost center. As Lacan insists, the navel of the dream in Freud designates the gap of the unconscious, the carefully stitched cut that one cannot re-open 'without great care' (*FFCP*, 23). It is in the network formed by these stitches where '*ich*' was and where, Lacan reminds us, the ancients were able to recognize 'messages from the gods' (*FFCP*, 44). Indeed, Yvonne experiences in dreams 'a flash of bright light' which she calls the 'light of God, perhaps, shining into my soul'. The experience makes her cry, but leaves a 'kindness' behind it, 'an ineffable gentleness' (*ABB*, 60). If Yvonne succeeds where others (i.e. James, Sansom) do not, that is, in figuring out Gareth's hide-out, this is because she lends an ear to the voice addressing her from that zone of shades inhabited by the gods²⁸ and learns to care for its beautiful and endangered nature in both herself and in others: 'In my dream, Gareth was not Gareth any more. The form he'd left behind was a magnificent long-necked bird, purple plumage soaked black with rain. I held its beautiful curved head and cried for its strangeness, its shabby iridescence. It was a joke played on nature, a proof of what could not survive' (*ABB*, 156).

²⁸ In her dreams Yvonne connects with Gareth who guides her on her journey ('You have to go and find the Saxons', 154), appeases her fears ('You're about a hundred yards from safety', 180) and reminds her of her own responsibility ('And now I need you to show me that you care about that', 155).

She can piece together where Gareth *is* only at that moment when, rid of the implant aimed to enhance her memory, she is able to recognize where he has always been, namely, in his memory of a square filled with chirping birds in Verona. At this moment of discovery, Yvonne is able to feel the texture of the tissue enveloping the cryptic messages he has been sending her and to fulfil her duty towards him. From this point onwards, her chase for Gareth and the stolen brain-mapping data becomes ‘a churching’, that is, a journey back to her own childhood memories of home (a ‘house of science and faith’),²⁹ as well as a quest for future forms of community: ‘Churches I notice more than anything’, she confesses. ‘I’m churching. I’m a churcher’ (*ABB*, 242). It is no wonder, then, that she finds Gareth in the aptly named church S. Maria della Concezione (*ABB*, 243). Arriving there, Yvonne shows Gareth that she cares about him and about what he has risked sharing with her: i.e. the feathery signifier that, in its oddity, makes him the beautiful, unique, and vulnerable creature he is. Re-calling this signifier, coaxing it back in her hands to hold and pet it, she makes of herself the link Gareth needs, a ‘human link back to health and happiness’ (*ABB*, 95). Unlike ‘the brain doctors’ who tried to cure Gareth with ‘their happiness drugs’, sending all ‘the birds to sleep so they can’t be any bother to anyone’, and unlike James who remained content with chasing them away, Yvonne learns to tend to the frightened wildlife inside *le manque-à-être*, just like Daren does in his nursing of Effi (*ABB*, 57). It is this new ‘con-science’ she has acquired that forms the basis of the ‘unlikely family’ (*ABB*, 261) we meet in the final chapter of the novel, where a black male carer, a churcher and an Alzheimer’s patient reinvent wisdom and memory as ways of ‘being with other people’.³⁰

The novel appropriately ends with the image of an *ecclesia*, a congregation of people who have come together to celebrate the retrieval of the brain-mapping data, the completion and publication of the Lorenzo Circuit, as well as the launch of the impressive Memory Center, a tribute to the neuroscience of memory. Bustling with life, speech and thought, the newly established center becomes a materialization of the Platonic aviary, the box which Gareth wanted to see filled with tamed birds, and James strove to keep empty. Poised between the two, Yvonne tends to the captured birds and learns to read the oddities of their flight. But she also lends an unhearing ear³¹ to the flock of scattering wildlife, the ‘thoughts that cannot know themselves’ (*ABB*, 270).

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²⁹ This is how Yvonne describes her home. Her father used to be a vet, but he gave up science to become a vicar. See *ABB*, 25.

³⁰ Fernyhough writes: ‘Memory is not just about remembering the past or predicting the future; it is also a way of being with other people’ (*PL*, 196).

³¹ Lacan writes: ‘Perhaps the voice of the gods makes itself heard, but it is a long time since men lent their ears to them in their original state – it is well known that the ears are made not to hear with’ (*FFCP*, 45).

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Inconștientul biologic, memoria și identitatea în romanul lui Charles Fernyhough *A Box of Birds*

Articolul își propune să se angajeze într-o dezbateră critică a modelelor narative materialiste ale identității umane, dând o replică dintr-o perspectivă contemporană ancorată în secolul 21 chestiunii învechite, „obosite” a subiectivității. Folosindu-mă de teoria neuroștiințifică și psihanaliza lacaniană, interpretez romanul *A Box of Birds* al lui Charles Fernyhough (2012) ca pe o reflecție creativă asupra naturii memoriei, conștientului și a inconștientului. Așa cum voi demonstra, ceea ce se află la fundamentul reflecției lui Fernyhough este alegoria platonice a minții umane ca volieră. Preluată și re-interpretată de diverse personaje ale romanului, această alegorie îi permite lui Fernyhough să experimenteze cu discursuri contemporane ale neuro-subiectivității, care marchează o relație mai dinamică, mai bine conturată între minte, creier și corp.