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Abstract

Traditionally, literary beasts of the colonial era tended to reflect visions of an exoticised other, feared or desired. They provided texts with aesthetic but passive images, tropes of human desire, but were rarely displayed as creatures considered as themselves. Leconte de Lisle's poems, for example, abound with creatures that evoke nostalgia for civilisations gone-by; attraction to far away countries; and a yearning to escape from modernity and the day-to-day realities of western societies.

LUCILE DESBLACHE

Writers on the Wing: Birds and the (De/Re)construction of Cultural Memory in Patrick Chamoiseau and J.M. Coetzee's Fictional Narratives

Traditionally, literary beasts of the colonial era tended to reflect visions of an exoticised other, feared or desired. They provided texts with aesthetic but passive images, tropes of human desire, but were rarely displayed as creatures considered as themselves. Leconte de Lisle's poems, for example, abound with creatures that evoke nostalgia for civilisations gone-by; attraction to far away countries; and a yearning to escape from modernity and the day-to-day realities of western societies. Animals were essentially ahistoricised aesthetic figures with which no real encounter was taking place. Postcolonial writers were quick to draw a parallel between human and non-human creatures, showing how animals and colonised human beings were both deprived of history. Or rather, as postcolonial theorists from Fanon to Glissant have acknowledged, how their histories have been absorbed by that of the dominant subjects. In fact, both animals and slaves have been instrumental in the construction of colonial power from which they were excluded. In their poetic representation of ahistorical animals, writers of the colonial area, consciously or unconsciously promoted visions of this exclusion. Appropriated as poetic accessories of the exotic by Western poets of the nineteenth century, birds, appearing frequently but exclusively as aesthetic figures, were symbols of a seductive and passive other. They were used as a device to evoke exoticised visions of alterity or to mask visions of oppression through their aesthetic presence. Referring to the ambivalent representation of oppression in Saint-John Perse's poetry, Chamoiseau highlights how colonisation has been implicitly encouraged by creative artists who promoted visions of the exotic while suppressing to silence the suffering of the colonised:

Les romanciers et les poètes ont souvent précédé, souvent accompagné, les colons et marchands! [Saint-John Perse est] un conquistador de grand talent mais ... conquistador quand même! Car il ne dit rien du feu des âmes dans le silence des oppressions [...]. Il les sent, les devine, mais en fait il s'en fout...! (Chamoiseau 2003 481) [Italics in original]

[*Novelists and poets have often preceded, often accompanied colonisers and traders!* [Saint-John Perse is a] very talented conquistador but ... nevertheless a conquistador! He does not say anything about the fire of the souls in the silence of oppressions [...]. *He feels them, guesses them, but in fact he does not give a damn...!*]

As voices emerged from this ‘silence of oppressions’, animals appeared in texts in three essential ways: first, as characters taken or inspired from traditional tales; second, as tropes of colonisation and oppression; third, as wild creatures or imaginary non-human creatures present in the landscape and life of a given community. The examples I choose will refer to Creole and African cultures, as writers discussed later belong to these cultures. In the first instance, animals tend to be used as a strategy of resistance against or of denunciation of oppression. Although not endowed with speech, they are instrumental in spreading the ‘*parole fondatrice*’ (founding speech) (Chamoiseau 2000 725) of cultures deprived of written history. The rabbit, for example, one of the most recurrent characters in tales, is always portrayed as finding ways to escape and functions as an allegory of freedom from oppression. Although birds are rarely part of the traditional bestiary of tales, they do appear in them, mainly as allegories of freedom.

In the second instance, some domestic animals figure as emblems of colonial power. Dogs and horses, the traditional accomplices of white colonisers in their acts of violence, often appear as visions of domination. They are particularly present in French Creole literature, and they also haunted white writers decades before postcolonial texts were written. In 1924, when Saint-John Perse described his soul as darkened by the scent of a horse (‘*mon âme tout enténébrée d’un parfum de cheval!*’) (177)¹ in his poem *Anabase*, connotations of suppressed violence can be perceived. Associations between violence and birds emerge in Creole texts through representation of rooster fights (Frankétienne 1975).

The third group of animals mentioned refers to real or imaginary creatures associated with a particular country, area or culture. Within the context of postcolonial creation, this last category of representation is particularly interesting, as it does not consistently or exclusively rely on traditional images or on established symbolic perceptions of non-human creatures. Animals invest the text with a creativity that is less anthropocentric and allows writers to ‘tear reality apart’ (‘*déchirer le réel*’) (Chamoiseau 2000 729), superimposing real and non-real, human and non-human, historical and magical realism. It also invests them with the power to construct cultures of diversity and opacity such as those promoted by postcolonial thinkers, For Edouard Glissant, in particular, the comprehension of other beings is not always necessary or even desirable. Part of the attraction to them in general and to different species in particular resides in a non-comprehension of them, which he refers to as opacity and which he sees as instrumental in the formation of human identities. (see Le Pelletier 170). Wild birds, so diverse in their sub-species and so different from humans, appear very frequently in this last group of textual representation.

As creatures which are not intrinsically useful to human societal and economic structures, wild birds have been chosen to illustrate how their ‘opaque’ presence contributes to the construction and/or to the deconstruction of cultural memory. I shall also consider how domesticated species can be represented and used as part of both a discourse and a counter-discourse of enclosure.² Birds such as ducks,

crows and magpies can in fact be associated with claustrophobic, nostalgic or ambiguous visions of possession and dispossession.

Birds play multiple roles in postcolonial fiction. They reveal attitudes which echo and perhaps pre-empt new visions of alterity and identity. They initiate a wide spectrum of emotional reactions from human beings, from the idealisation of an aesthetic image to an expression of repulsion. They produce contrasting associations, from freedom to imprisonment. They play a large role in colonial and postcolonial texts, including Chamoiseau's and Coetzee's (auto-)fiction.³ Finally, literary birds can be allegorical or metaphorical but they are rarely deliberately anthropomorphic, unlike domestic animals or wild mammals. In fiction, the latter are often introduced as characters in their own right, generally associated with their human counterparts. Birds, on the contrary, do not play a diegetic role. They generally do not tell a human story. Writers include them as tropes of human concerns, but also, perhaps more importantly, as a non-human presence, be they instruments of deterritorialisation or living creatures conveying, as far as it is possible, a non-human perspective of the world.

Birds appear as recurrent figures in Creole and black South African literature, less significantly perhaps in the latter. Winged creatures are one of the few species not associated with oppression in the history of the West Indies and, indeed they feature as free spirits. In *Omeros*, Nobel prize-winner Derek Walcott uses the sea-swift as a unifying device for the narrative and expresses the closeness of birds and humans in West Indian culture:

Toutes gibiers c'est frères moin', pis n'homme ni pour travail.

[Every bird is my brother;
Because man must work like the birds until he die. (Walcott 160)]

French West Indian literature hosts three types of birds: tropical birds associated with the forest, with its strong connotations of freedom; fighting birds, such as cocks, which are part of a tradition inherent in West Indian and Haitian cultures; imaginary birds such as the *soucounnan* — half-man half-bird — which haunt Creole *oraliture*. Birds in Creole literature cannot be mentioned without reference to the trees and forests in which they dwell. For instance, throughout his work, Glissant portrays woods as a shelter for escaping slaves and as a restorative space where an individual can regain sanity and heal his/her wounds. Birds permeate both Glissant's fiction and his theoretical work. The spectacular cross-breeding from which they issue symbolises Creole identity, as the following excerpt emphasises:

Dans la Caraïbe, les oiseaux Zémi ont rencontré à la fin les oiseaux d'Afrique. Le koribibi, survivant à la Conquête, et inspiré du Serpent à plumes, partage la nuit des cases avec l'oiseau Sénoufo, invisible évadé du bateau négrier. (Glissant 2005 77)

[In the Caribbean, Zemi birds finally met African birds. The koribibi, survivor of the Conquest, inspired by the plumed Serpent, shares his nights in the cabins with the Senoufo-bird, invisible escapee from the slave ship.]

As one of Glissant's spiritual and intellectual heirs, Chamoiseau builds his imagery from these visions. The etymology of his name, which means 'bird of cham' also reminds French readers of his affinity with birds. As Glissant emphasises, the author of *Texaco* is 'à l'écoute d'une voix venue de loin, dont l'écho plane sur les lieux de notre mémoire et oriente nos futurs' (keen to listen to a voice coming from far away, whose echo hovers over the realms of our memory and gives direction to our futures) (Glissant 1988 6).⁴

Birds are particularly pervasive in Chamoiseau's *Biblique des derniers gestes*, a 780 page allegory of anti-colonial resistance. The main protagonist, Balthazar Bodule-Jules, 'born in all eras, in all places and in all oppressed circumstances' (Chamoiseau 2002 27) revisits colonial history. Chamoiseau takes the reader through a maze of polyphonic discourses, but it is the immemorial counter-discourse of the forest which gives all these voices meaning and allows the narrator to tell his tale with authority:

Le vieux rebelle revit les arbres de son enfance, et ces arbres lui ramenèrent tous les arbres qu'il avait rencontrés [...]. Les souvenirs du rebelle qu'il était devenu et de l'enfant qu'il avait été se mélangeaient dans son esprit à des feuillages multiples, se confondaient dans l'ombrage des troncs immémoriaux, se superposaient sur les touffes de bambous et les rideaux de liane qui provenaient de partout. Des merles se mêlaient à des songes de corbeaux, [...] des colibris battaient famine en compagnie de vieux toucans, de chouettes, de quetzals, et de volées d'oiseaux bien plus incalculables que les milliers de noms dont les peuples de la terre les avaient affublés.

(Chamoiseau 2002 148)

[The old rebel remembered the trees of his childhood and these trees brought back for him all the trees he had encountered. [...]. Memories of the rebel he had become and of the child that he had been were merging in his mind with multiple foliage, were disappearing in the shade of ageless trunks, were projected onto bamboo clumps and curtains of creepers coming everywhere. Images of blackbirds were dissolving into visions of crows, [...] humming birds were sharing their hunger with old toucans, owls, quetzals and more innumerable flights of birds than the thousands of names which the people of the earth had saddled them with.]

Birds, in Chamoiseau's texts, are primarily images of a pre-colonial reality. They are instrumental agents in making the reader aware of that reality which is essential to the revisiting of colonial history. Horses and mastiffs tend to haunt Creole texts as figures of colonial domination, as shadows of a static and painful past. Birds on the other hand, are restorative. They are creatures of light, freedom, colour and movement. They are mediators between humans and non-humans, between past and present. They are visions of a past that was not a past of oppression and can be linguistically referred to in Creole and/or in French, bridging the gap between the two cultures and valuing both. In the tropical and postcolonial environment that underlies Chamoiseau's fiction, they burst through the text as signs of irrepressible beauty and diversity. More than allegories of freedom or ideological decoys, they function in the text as visions of 'diversality', defined by Chamoiseau and other Creole writers as a notion of universality that

refuses uniformity, one that values ‘a world diffracted but recomposed, the conscious harmoniation of preserved identities’ (Bernabé, Chamoiseau & Confiant 903).

Birds also appear as premonitory beings and tropes of human fears. They are not seen as idealised, pre-lapsarian creatures evoking a golden age or a universal paradise. Chamoiseau belongs to a generation of Creole writers wary of the universalising tendencies of the *négritude* movement. In Césaire’s poetry and theatre for example, dogs tend to appear exclusively as metaphorical visions of oppression. Chamoiseau is aware of the limitations of unilateral symbolic associations, particularly with regard to animal representation. They can perpetuate binary visions of otherness. Chamoiseaus’ winged creatures are not only signs of the diversity of life on our planet: they are cultural and expressive landmarks, and tropes of our many emotions. Chamoiseau gives new meanings to old metaphors and deconstructs symbolisms to express diversity. He also virulently denounces Western obsessions with naming and classifying living creatures with the aim of controlling or possessing them for human profit or consumption, and reappropriates the notion of naming. Lists of birds are not inserted with a dry, dehumanising effect as enumerations frequently are. In Western societies, they tend to be associated with Linnean taxonomy, and with the hierarchical, rational classifications of living creatures as scientific objects of study. In Chamoiseau’s texts, they either echo human emotions, or are presented as real creatures - manifestations of an eco-diversity that must be valued for the natural environment to be preserved and for suppressed histories to be reclaimed. Two examples will be given to illustrate this. Both are taken from *Biblique des derniers gestes*.

In the first example, Balthazar Bodule–Jules relates his vision of a condor as the catalyser of deep feelings of anxiety. After this experience he sees birds as releasers of emotion, evidence of cultural memory, and signs of artistic presence. They belong to cultures that are at times relevant to a local context (the hummingbird of Aztec civilisation), but which also can be meaningful worldwide (Charlie Bird Parker). Twenty birds, mostly imaginary, are listed in a footnote at the bottom of the main text, which breaks the linearity of the narrative, involving the reader in a more interactive approach. Chamoiseau’s lexical choices in the naming of these birds are extremely varied, but always antithetic to scientific taxonomies. Birds, which originate from the four corners of the globe, incarnate members of a *musée imaginaire*. References can be quite esoteric as for the Okombo bird of Edouard Glissant’s recent novel, *Sartorius, le roman des Batoutous*; in contrast to such intertextual complexity, simple blackbirds picking custard apples are also introduced. The birds of *Biblique* are associated with writers, creative artists and a range of cultural traditions. They trigger both the reader’s memories and emotions. I can only give an excerpt from Chamoiseau’s long proliferation:

M. Balthazar Bodule–Jules [...] vit un mâle-manman-oiseau, les ailes ouvertes sur plusieurs mètres, qui exerçait très haut une lenteur funèbre. [...] Il l’avait conservé en

mémoire, non plus comme un condor, mais comme signe alliançant et la terre et le ciel, passé et avenir, mort née de la vie, et vie jointe à la mort. Avec les compressions de la mémoire, il devint l'épure même de l'espèce des oiseaux. *Oiseaux!*... [...]¹

¹ Depuis l'angoisse du Condor rouge, je regarde les oiseaux, et même mieux je les vois! ... Ils enveloppent le monde des effets de leur vol : Oiseaux bleus des encres de l'Asie! Les hommes-oiseaux d'Océanie! L'oiseau jaune-rouge de Chine, maître du chaos, qui n'a pas de visage mais six pattes et quatre ailes! L'oiseau Anza de Babylone! Cet oiseau très intime qui fit Charlie Parker. Oiseaux de l'Inde qui ne se tiennent que sur les branches du monde! [...] L'albatros de Baudelaire qui fut vœu du poète! Et l'oiseau de Coleridge que le marin maudit trimbalait à son cou! Et l'oiseau de Glissant, cet Okombo du peuple des Batoutos, pas plus visible qu'eux-mêmes et qui élève ton âme et qui l'aide à durer! Les merles noirs de Saint- Joseph qui crèvent mes pommes-cannelles! Et l'oiseau-colibri qui fut dieu de la guerre en cet endroit où j'ai souffert! Et cet oiseau caché dans le nom de Faulkner, et qu'il décrit comme idéal du soi! (Chamoiseau 2002: 203)

[M. Balthazar Bodule–Jules [...] saw a male-manman-bird, its wings spanning several metres, exercising his gloomy flight high above. [...] He had kept it in his memory, not as a condor any more, but as a sign of alliance between heaven and earth, past and future, death born of life and life joined to death. With memory compressions, it became the template of the bird species itself. *Birds!*... [...]

¹ Since my anguish relating to the red Condor, friends, I have been looking at birds, and even better: I am seeing them!... They are enveloping the world with the effects of their flight: blue Birds of Asian inks! Bird-men of Oceania! The yellow–red bird of China, master of chaos, with no face but six legs and four wings! The Anza bird of Babylon! The very intimate bird which made Charlie Parker! Birds of India holding on to branches of the world! [...] Baudelaire's albatross which was the poet's aspiration! And Coleridge's bird hanging about the ill-fated mariner's neck! And Glissant's bird, the Okombo of the Batoutos people, as invisible as they, which elevates your soul and helps it to endure! The blackbirds of Saint-Joseph which pierce my custard apples! And the humming-bird which was god of war in this place where I suffered! And this bird hidden in Faulkner's name and described by him as the ideal self!]

Birds not only function as tropes in the text. Chamoiseau also inserts more realistic descriptions and lists which emphasise the diversity of a rich tropical winged fauna now decimated or in danger of extinction. As noted earlier about Glissant's representation of birds, the presence of diversity echoes visions of creoleness as a vital process of crossbreeding of species, ethnicities and cultures, that is indispensable to life and to the emergence of novel creative trends. The realistic presence of birds in Chamoiseau's text also contributes to the structural and linguistic creolisation of the language. In the passage quoted below, the rebel protagonist is a child. He is initiated into the mysterious powers of the forest by Man l'Oubliée, spirit woman, healer, safe-keeper of Martinique's memories and, beyond these, of our planet and its beings. The child discovers that his capacity to communicate with animals goes jointly with an awareness of how numerous birds are. Once more, the enumeration takes place in a footnote⁵ where Chamoiseau gives way to his 'démasure' (taste for excess), referring to birds endemic to the Caribbean region:

Ce fut la période de sa vie où il rencontra le plus d'oiseaux aujourd'hui quasiment disparus!... Cette aptitude à fasciner bestioles et animaux s'amplifia à mesure qu'il en prenait conscience.

¹ Des élaènes siffleuses, des cohées à queues blanches, des bécasseaux roussâtres, des gravelots à double collier, de petits martinets noirs, des coulicoux charmeurs à bec jaune et œil vif, des canards routoutous, des merles fous à lunette, des moucherolles et des moqueurs-trembleurs... (Chamoiseau 2002 266)

[This was the period of his life when he met birds, most of whom are today nearly extinct!... This capacity for attracting bugs and animals grew as he became aware of it.

¹ Caribbean elaeinae, white-tailed nightjars, buff-breasted sandpipers, killdeers, small blackswifts, yellow-billed and bright-eyed cuckoos, masked ducks, crazy bare-eyed thrushes, pewees and brown tremblers.]

Birds appear in Chamoiseau's texts as biological, linguistic, cultural movements which are essential to our appreciation of life. They are visions of the chaos and opacity exposed in Glissant's poetics of chaos (1997), which are at the heart of Chamoiseau's writing:

Il faut réclamer le droit à l'opacité. Je n'ai pas besoin de comprendre quelqu'un pour accepter de vivre, d'aimer, de travailler avec lui. [...] Et] si l'on acceptait de ne plus se comprendre un moment? [...] Il n'y a pas une seule réponse [...]. Il y a une poétique de la relation et des poétiques du chaos. (Le Pelletier 1998 170-171)

[We must reclaim the right to opacity. I do not need to understand someone to live with him, to love him, to work with him. [...] How about accepting to not understand each other for a moment? [...] There isn't just one answer [...]. There is a poetics of relation and there are poetics of chaos.]

For Chamoiseau, creativity is in opposition to sterile order and rationality. It thrives on opacity and on what Glissant would call 'nomadic thinking' (Glissant 1997). Birds in Chamoiseau's text function as signs, symbols and/or real visions of colours and movements which humans cannot always decipher but which make us feel alive and give us a sense of belonging to the world, beyond our races, genders and histories:

Il [Balthazar Bodule-Jules] sut à quel point le mouvement était inscrit au cœur des choses vivantes : la matière insensible des ombres et des lumières, la vibration des feuilles, la voltige des oiseaux [...] tout bougeait, allait imperceptible, vibrat sans cesse [...] nulle conscience ne fixait l'étendue de ce mouvement profond, mais tout règne de l'immuable interdisait une perception apaisée du réel. L'indéchiffrable allant où se fondait le-temps-qui-passe renvoyait au paisible du monde, au signal de la vie bien vivante. (Chamoiseau 2002 231-32)

[He [Balthazar Bodule-Jules] knew how much movement was inscribed at the heart of living things: the non-sentient matter of shadows and lights, the vibration of leaves, the flutter of the birds [...] everything moved, shifted imperceptibly, vibrated constantly [...] no awareness regulated the spread of this vast movement, but the reign of the immutable always thwarted a calm perception of the real. The indecipherable went where the time-going-by was ending, referred to peace in the world, to the sign of a life fully living.]

In his dying moments, Balthazar Bodule-Jules 'j'écoute les voix du monde' on his radio ('listening to the voices of the world') (752) also realises the degree

to which birds allow him to broaden his perception of reality and his awareness of the limited spectrum of his own:

Les merles viennent jusque dessous la table récupérer les miettes de pain rassis. [...] Ce sont les merles qui lui montrent ce qui tombe de sa vie. [...] Ils sont vigilants, nerveux, vibratiles. Leur plumage brille, leurs yeux sont illisibles, leur fiente instantanée. [...] Ils sont dans un autre ordre de réalité, reliés à d'autres structures de réel, ils voient entendent perçoivent au-delà de ce qui m'est donné. (750)

[Blackbirds venture beneath the table to get the wasted bread crumbs. [...] The blackbirds show him what is falling out of his life. [...] They are alert, nervous, vibrating. Their feathers are shining, their eyes are unreadable, their droppings instant. [...] They are in another order of reality, linked to other structures of the real, they see hear perceive beyond what is given to me.]

Chamoiseau's birds — and his insects, also introduced as creatures of wonder instead of the creatures of repulsion that they are in traditional western cultures — enter Creole writing in unique ways. They are agents of diversity at the heart of Caribbean landscapes and express Caribbean identities. They therefore allow Creole readers to share a sense of belonging to their own environment, to their own geographies and to retrieve cultural memories obliterated by colonial history, visible in and essential to the pre-colonial settings of forests.

If for Chamoiseau birds — their movements, their colours and their songs — are both restorative and instrumental in promoting creolised cultures, J.M. Coetzee's visions of winged creatures are neither healing nor uplifting, as the reader might expect from a writer who conveys bleak visions of both the self and the other. Colonial fiction and poetry written by white writers tended to exoticise and aestheticise birds, the latter generally figuring in their works as accessories. Yet they could also represent an other unable to speak for him/her/itself, like Crusoe's parrot, regurgitating human phrases and clichés. Elleke Boehmer comments on Defoe's masterpiece, that Crusoe 'trains his parrot to speak to him his own name. Thus the signifiers of his past life are repeated back to him' (Boehmer 17); and in his Nobel lecture, which revisits Robinson Crusoe's story, Coetzee himself emphasised that 'Even at his best, his island parrot [...] spoke no word he was not taught to speak by his master' (Coetzee 2003). In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, one of his earlier books, a dead parrot haunts the dreams of the Magistrate of Empire, 'poisoned by history, [...] capable of mere parroting' (May 415). Similarly, the forlorn version of Robinson Crusoe introduced by Coetzee in his Nobel lecture keeps with him 'the dead parrot fixed to its perch' (Coetzee 2003) — a symbol of the past he is carrying with him.

In Coetzee's work, birds do not appear as frequently as dogs, spiders, insects and various crawlers that are placed prominently in his texts. Non-human beings have been increasingly visible in the fiction of an author who recently stated that 'most stories present themselves as being about other people (and animals)' (Coetzee 2003a: 134). For this painter of human cruelty and indifference, dogs (and other animals such as hunted game or cattle doomed to be slaughtered) appear mainly

as victims of human perversity or thoughtlessness while insects, often associated with humans, show them indifference. Spiders provide powerful allegories of a web that humanity has spun around itself, trapping itself and any other form of life as it manufactures its own oppression. Birds, more discreetly perhaps but nevertheless consistently in over four decades of writing, emerge as figures that highlight the perverse obsession of the human species with rationality. Although this essay deals with Coetzee's more recent fiction, I shall start with examples from his first and last books to illustrate how the theme permeates his work. In his first piece of fiction, *Dusklands*, one of the two main protagonists is an expert in psychological warfare. He is briefed by the US Department of Defense to write a report on propaganda methods during the Vietnam war. Unstable and disturbed, presumably by the topic of his report, he desperately tries to hold on to rational certainties. His obsession with classification at the expense of understanding and perception seems to anticipate his collapse into insanity:

At all hours of the day, birdsong falls on my alert ears. I do not know the names of the birds, but have no doubt that they can be learned, given time, out of books or from an informant. [...]

[Significant to me,] I now find, is the problem of names. [...] Think of the songbirds of the forest. With each other, as well as with other phenomena they have rather simple relationships. Therefore one tends to ignore songbirds in favor of things that enter into more complex relationships. This is an example of the unfortunate tyranny of method over subject. It would be a healthy corrective to learn the names of the songbirds. (Coetzee 1998 35–36)

The 'healthy corrective' would be of course to be able to hear and appreciate the bird songs and not to turn exploration into oppression, but as Coetzee suggests forty years after this first novel through the fictional voice of Mr C. in *Diary of a Bad Year*, this is not in line with rational thinking:

What Cartesian nonsense to think of birdsong as pre-programmed cries uttered by birds to advertise their presence to the opposite sex, and so forth! Each bird-cry is a full-hearted release of the self into the air, accompanied by such joy as we can barely comprehend. I! says each cry: I! What a miracle! Singing liberates the voice, allows it to fly, expands the soul. In the course of military training, on the other hand, people are drilled in using the voice in a rapid, flat, mechanical manner, without pause for thought. What damage it must do to the soul to submit to the military voice, to embody it as one's own! (Coetzee 2007 132)

Although in his biographical work, Coetzee indicates how much he values wild birds and what an important part they played in his childhood (Coetzee 1998a 80), visions of birds in Coetzee's fiction are rarely so optimistic. Their representation tends to be twofold. Domesticated birds, ducks in particular, are associated with a sense of loss of the past, with pastoral visions and life styles which cannot — and perhaps should not? — be sustained any longer. Wild birds on the other hand are generally portrayed as agents of indifference or allegories of evil. Interestingly, and in spite of the passage quoted above, Coetzee's birds,

whether wild or domesticated, are mostly silent. This silence contributes to the bleakness of his fiction, but it also acts either as a sign of indifference to humans — as illustrated by the mute albatrosses gazing at bird-watchers with detachment (Coetzee 2004 56) — or, more frequently, of powerlessness. Silence in South African literature of the twentieth century is mostly about the oppression of the other's voice. In 1986, Coetzee concluded an article about the South African farm novel with these words: '[W]hen will we hear music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds?' (Coetzee 1986 17). More than two decades later, the author's birds are still muted and, as he reminds us through the voice of Elizabeth Costello, 'animals have only their silence left with which to confront us' (Coetzee 2004 70) for their voices, which used to resound on our planet in contrast to human voices can no longer be heard. 'In the olden days the voice of man raised in reason, was confronted by the roar of the lion' (70). Now it mostly confronts the human-generated noises of rationality.

The silence or absence of living creatures can also be evoked through inanimate objects representing animals or through animal packs/flocks stripped of all identity and individuality. Recurrent visions of the parrot as the expression of a sense of lack, loss or emptiness was discussed earlier, but domesticated birds can also trigger similar feelings. Ducks in particular are ambivalent creatures in Coetzee's fiction, expressing simultaneously an attraction for pastoral landscapes of the past and disgust towards it. Just like the dead parrots mentioned above, they can be empty, mechanical figures — 'wind-up ducks that waddle for a while and then run down' (Coetzee 2007 183), introduced as analogy to our sense of inadequacy. But tame ducks are also often present in Coetzee's fiction as creatures that have been corrupted by humans; or as creatures that can inspire corruption. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Anya displays 'a waggle of the bum', aware of its effect on Mr C.:

I picked it up from the ducks, I think: a shake of the tail so quick it is almost a shiver. Quick-quack. Why should we be too high and mighty to learn from the ducks? (31)

Such an innocent teasing trick may in fact be viewed more as amusement than corruption, but domestic ducks repeatedly appear as untrustworthy. In his Nobel lecture, Coetzee tells the tale of Lincolnshire ducks (decoy ducks or duckoys) taught by humans (decoy men) to attract German and Dutch wild ducks to fens where they are trapped by decoy dogs, also trained by humans, and 'clubbed on the spot and plucked and sold by the hundred and by the thousand' (Coetzee 2003). As ducks appear rarely in Western literature, unlike geese and swans — common traditional literary characters — there is no connotation attached to the species and Coetzee uses this relative neutrality to express the following ambivalence. Domesticated ducks become agents of human power, like horses and dogs, but their betrayal of their own species tends to make them despicable and highlight the human evil in training them to be traitors to their wild counterparts. Their domestication takes them away from the non-humanity which is their essence, not

towards more links with humanity but rather towards inhumanity, that peculiar feature of humans which is at the core of Coetzee's work. The representation of domesticated ducks is also ambivalent as, in addition to being accomplices to human malevolence, they are part of a pastoral landscape which the son of a white South African lawyer from a sheep farming background cannot entirely renounce. This is sensitively expressed in *Disgrace*, where David Lurie, an academic in limbo after he has been accused of sexual harassment by one of his students, visits his daughter Lucy. She struggles to run 'a frontier farm of the new breed', growing flowers, vegetables and keeping a dog kennel (Coetzee 2000 62):

He strolls with her past the mud-walled dam, where a family of ducks coasts serenely, past the beehives, and though the garden: flowerbeds and winter vegetables [...].

In the old days, cattle and maze. Today, dogs and daffodils. The more things change the more they remain the same. History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein. Perhaps history has learnt a lesson. (62)

Lucy's efforts to revisit history in collaborative ways will be compromised, as she is attacked and raped by relatives of her black farm-partner and her trust in the latter is shaken. In the 1986 article mentioned above, Coetzee sees 'Schreiner's account of the farm as conditioned by, and in the service of, her critique of colonial culture. [...] Schreiner's farm is an unnatural and arbitrary imposition on a doggedly ahistorical landscape' (Coetzee 4). This landscape is not only 'undomesticated' but 'indomesticable' (2). Coetzee uses similar strategies of textual representation in some of his novels (for example, *Life and Times of Michael K.*) but here the device is used in reverse. *Disgrace* is a novel about renouncing power (physical, intellectual, economic and political power, as well as status and dignity). The pastoral scene described above recalls images of a past which is inescapable for a white South African, along with a vision that perhaps history could be rewritten into a possible future. Unlike the barren landscape of Olive Schreiner, a farm with domesticated animals speaks history, and conveys the stability and continuity of that history. David Lurie knows that in post-apartheid South Africa, such visions can only be ghost pastorals reminisced in the illusory silence of a dream:

Nonetheless, there are things he misses — the duck family for instance: Mother Duck tacking about on the surface of the dam, her chest puffed out with pride while Eenie, Meenie and Minie and Mo paddle busily behind, confident that as long as she is there they are all safe from harm. (Coetzee 2000 178)

The illusion is entirely dissolved in Coetzee's last novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*, where even wild birds figure as creatures of enclosure and entrapment. They generally feature in parks or other controlled human spaces, where they lead their lives either in total indifference to human beings or express malevolence towards them. Either way they seem to defy human visions of possession. Yet, as creatures confined to human spaces, be they green enclosures, they are exiled from their natural environment:

Once upon a time the little strip of land across from the Towers belonged to the birds, who scavenged in the creek bed and cracked open pine cone for the kernels. Now it has become a green space, a public park for two-legged animals. [...]he magpie-in-chief (this is how I think of him) [...] walks in slow circles around me where I sit. He is not inspecting me. He is not curious about me. He is warning me, warning me off. He is also looking for my vulnerable point, in case he needs to attack, in case it comes down to that. (Coetzee 2007 207)

Unlike Chamoiseau's visions of colour, movement and song, Coetzee's birds do not fly, they do not sing, they are dark and constrained. Anya, the young secretary Mr C. is infatuated with, is keen to suggest a more personal zest to his writing. She suggests, without much conviction, that birds, however ruthless, could be a new source of inspiration:

Write about the world around you. Write about the birds. There are always a mob of magpies strutting around the park as if they own it, he could write about them. Shoo, you monsters! I say, but of course, they pay no heed. No brow, the skull running straight into the beak, no space for a brain. (Coetzee 2007 35)

Coetzee's fiction does not engage with the process of becoming-animal famously analysed by Deleuze and Guattari. Animals, including birds, remain animals while humans do not go through metamorphosis as Coetzee does not allow them this escape route. Neither man nor beast has the deterritorialisation power necessary to create 'a continuum of reversible intensities ... a circuit of states that forms a mutual becoming, [...] a metamorphosis which] is part of a single circuit of the becoming-human of the animal and the becoming-animal of the human' (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka Toward a Minor Literature*, qtd in Urpeth 108). Coetzee's rejection of metamorphosis claims no 'ontology of relation' (108) between bird and human, no communication. The birds (and indeed the animals) chosen by Coetzee are pack creatures which, in Deleuzian terms, could allow his protagonists a line of escape, as to a degree, insects do for Magda in *The Heart of the Country* (Coetzee 1999 6, 15, 20, 25, 38). But Coetzee's human characters remain trapped, and his birds remain birds as such. They are individuals, even if some of them are empty shells reminding the reader of his/her own human worthlessness, like the parrot or the mechanical duck previously mentioned. Dead and empty, they challenge us with the weight of our past history; alive, they remind us that human beings are impostors. The world is theirs, just as much as we think it ours. The other may be mute but more threatening than ever:

One morning there was a sudden imperious clatter at my kitchen window. There he [the magpie-in-chief] was, clinging to the ledge with his claws, slapping his wings, glaring in, serving me with a warning: even indoors I might not be safe.

(Coetzee 2007 208)

When magpie does sing his sound is more like a war cry than a song:

Now in late spring, he and his wives sing to each other all night in the treetops. They could not care less that they keep me awake.

The magpie-in-chief has no firm idea how long human beings live, but he thinks it is not as long as magpies. He thinks I will die in that cage of mine, die of old age. Then he can batter the window down, strut in, and peck out my eyes. (208)

The picture is slightly less grim with the cockatoos visiting the park, as they are not hostile at least. An attempt is even made to communicate. But defiance comes from the human being this time:

One [cockatoo] sits peaceably in a wild plum tree. He regards me, holds a plum kernel in his claw as if to say, 'Would you like a bite?' I want to say, 'This is a public garden. You are as much a visitor as I, it is not up to you to offer me food.' But public, private, it is no more than a puff of air to him. 'It's a free world,' he says. (208)

Outsider and insider — be they master and slave, coloniser and colonised or man and magpie — are not able to establish communication. Birds in Coetzee's fiction have, to a degree, a symbolic meaning, but this meaning is generated by an inability to fully portray an animal through animal eyes, not by a desire to make the animal stand for something else. The negative symbolism of the magpie, for instance, hovers over *Diary of a Bad Year*. Yet, magpies are described by Coetzee in extremely realistic terms. They appear mostly as non-human creatures leading a life independent from humans. They are represented through human eyes, but a focus is given to their bird-like qualities. It is only because the writer's expression and the reader's perception are necessarily anthropocentric that a symbolic meaning is created. Connotations of a bird deemed to be selfish, cruel, known to dislodge other birds from their nests, are superimposed on realistic descriptions. The magpie is portrayed by a human, but also in contrast to humans. In recent years, the boundaries of difference between humans and non-humans deconstructed by philosophers and ethologists (Derrida 2008, de Waal 2005, Lestel 2001, Noske 1997), have become less distinct. Yet Coetzee highlights a difference which is perhaps the saddest possible difference between humans and non-humans: the human possession of 'a soul unable to bear the horrors of this world' (Coetzee 2007 225) and the sense of loneliness ensuing from it. Not that Coetzee denies animals a soul but their soul does not seem to have as heavy a burden to bear as the human one. The wild birds he depicts certainly show no concern for any welfare but their own. The author, as the main protagonist he constructs in *Diary of a Bad Year*, is a stranger to them. Alien to this other, he can only see in the latter fragments of his own being. For all the realistic visions of the magpie, at depth, he mirrors the sadness of his human gazer.

In conclusion then, can parallels be drawn between such contrasting visions of birds as Chamoiseau's and Coetzee's? Are the histories and cultural backgrounds of the authors too opposed for comparison? Chamoiseau and Coetzee certainly both involve animals in their interpretation of our histories. They both show great sensitivity towards non-human creatures and attempt to dissolve or reject the traditional symbolisms that limits them to social human constructs. But this is where similarities seem to end. Chamoiseau's lyrical visions urge the presence of

birds that humans may not comprehend. Their beauty is the beauty of difference, in some ways engendered by incomprehensibility, or at least compatible with it. Chamoiseau endeavours to translate their non-human presence into human writing, in particularly visible ways in *Biblique des derniers gestes*. He inserts their song in his text as a counter-discourse to human discourse. This not only gives a fuller meaning to human language but it also contributes to the creation of a poetics of ecology, inherent in Chamoiseau's fiction. Birds allow the magic realism of the text to take form, appearing at the same time as existing, if endangered, visions of the eco-diversity of the planet and as tropes of a diversity to be valued, interpreted and revisited through the expression of cultural memories. Their song links us to the urgencies of the present and the founding visions of the past. Their presence is essential to the creation of a 'chant narrative neuf (riche de toutes les épopées) fondateur du Lieu dans le total du monde' (a 'new narrative song [enriched by all epics] which can establish the founding Place⁶ in the totality of the world') (Chamoiseau 2002 316).

The language of birds perceived by Coetzee, on the other hand, tends to be not only inaccessible to readers but suppressed by us. For him, 'birds hover at the edge of our cruelty' (Ross 187); they appear as inescapable signs of our history, they remind us of a binary dialectic of power which always ends in exclusion and separation. Birds are primarily present as non-human creatures, not just as signifiers of human history. Yet Coetzee's lone beings, hunted down or confined to the enclosures created by humankind, however realistic their portrayal, inevitably echo our own, painful loneliness.

NOTES

- ¹ Translations are mine unless stated otherwise.
- ² Although the Enclosure Movement generally refers to the eighteenth-century trend towards rationalising farms which led to the transformation of public domains into private property only accessible to those who owned it, the notion of enclosure is used in a broader context here. It refers to human control of the natural environment and to the colonisation of "open", "wild" and "uncultivated" land and subjects' (Marzec 3).
- ³ I should specify that the situation of Martinique is that of a colonial rather than postcolonial country, since, as a Département d'Outre-Mer, it is not independent of France politically or economically. Chamoiseau might have preferred the term neocolonialism, but within the comparative context of this article, I have chosen to refer to postcolonialism.
- ⁴ This pun on "oiseau de cham" can in French refer to "oiseaux-chants". The latter are described by the author as creatures of charm in Martinique (Chamoiseau 1994 79).
- ⁵ It is interesting to note that the only substantial footnotes in *Biblique des premiers gestes* are devoted to birds. In the polyphonic discourse which characterises *Biblique des premiers gestes*, the inclusion of this paratext contributes to the counterpoint provided by the presence of birds throughout the novel.
- ⁶ Chamoiseau distinguishes between the notion of place (lieu) and territory (territoire). Places are multilingual, multicultural, multiracial spaces created through the

interweaving of different histories, as opposed to territories, which are more static entities created from the vision of one, unifying, common myth. (See Chamoiseau 2000)

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