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Narrating *le vivant:* the *Zoe*-Poetical Hypothesis

Prolegomena: Navigating around Words, Labels and Languages

Animal and environmental studies are marked by a wide variety of labels urging anyone engaging with these areas of study to take a stance on the use of relevant terms such as animal studies or zoopoetics, environmental/ green studies or environmental/green humanities, ecocriticism or ecopoetics. Such lexical proliferation arguably attests to a still on-going process of self-definition and sharpening of distinctions, including the one between North American and other national academic contexts and methodologies. For instance, the current preference in French academia for the terms "zoo-" and "eco- poetics" over terms like "animal studies," "environmental studies," or "ecocriticism" aims to reaffirm the centrality of the text, while it simultaneously indicates the persistence of formalist inheritance as well as a distancing from cultural studies which is still regarded with a sort of defiance in France.[1] It might also appear as a symptom of a certain uneasiness, which could be explained by the fact that the anthropocentric patterns of Western languages are not entirely suitable for naming the tenets and perspectives which animal and environmental scholars are interested in. In this regard, French philosopher Jacques Derrida's condemnation of the concept of "the animal" in its singular form as misleading, anthropocentric, and ultimately dangerous has become milestone for those who are interested in the question.[2]

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1 Cf. Simon ("Quelle place pour l'animal"), or Blanc, Chartier, and Pughe.

2 In his now famous ten-hour address given at the 1997 Cerisy-la-Salle conference, Derrida blamed the term for its anthropocentrism, saying: "[A] notion as general as 'the Animal,' as if all nonhuman living things could be groups without the common sense of this 'commonplace', the Animal, whatever the abyssal differences and structural limits that separate, in the very essence of their being, all 'animals', [is] a name that we would therefore be advised, to begin with, to keep within quotation marks. Confined within this catch-all concept, within this vast encampment of the animal, in this general singular, within the strict enclosure of this definite article … are *all the living things* that man does not recognize as his fellow, his neighbors, or his brothers" ("Animal" 402). In Derrida's view, the monolithic concept of "the Animal" then reactivates the dualism in which the thesis of human exceptionalism originates and proves to be inherently loaded with anthropocentrism. Rather, one should talk of "*animot*"–a portmanteau combining the two French terms *animal* and *mot* ("word") as well as phonetically echoing the French plural

The word "environment" has likewise been the subject of similar critiques, although less frequently quoted. As early as 1989, Michel Serres recommended to forget the word "environment" which, coined after the Latin word *viron* meaning *circle*, "implies that we human beings are the heart of a complex system in which things evolve around us, center of the universe, masters and owners of nature [and thus] recalls a bygone era when geocentrism reflected our narcissism, as we despised the world"[3] (5). Such criticism was echoed by Cheryll Glotfelty in 1996—"in its connotation, *enviro-* is anthropocentric and dualistic, implying that we humans are the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment" (xx)—yet it does not seem to have gained a wide audience in the English-speaking world and academia, as evidenced by the numerous "literature and environment" university programs or by the very name of *The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment* (*ASLE*), unchanged since its foundation in 1992.

The new terminology brought forth by the use of prefixes like "*zoo-*" and "*eco-*" surely provides a way to reduce the anthropocentric echoes of older terms. But like the former formulas, it keeps stressing what distinguishes the two fields under scrutiny in this volume rather than it helps us think about the ways which they might share and co-articulate. First, the opposition these labels echo outside the literary field—notably in ethics[4]—tends to map out two different territories suggesting that one would find "animal people" on one side, and "nature people" (those interested in and caring for trees, plants,

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for *animal* which is *animaux*—so that homogenization (and its corollary violence) would be avoided: "I would like to have the plural of animals heard in the general singular. There is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit. We have to envisage the existence of 'living creatures' whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single feature of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity…. Among non-humans and separate from nonhumans there is an immense multiplicity of other living things that cannot be homogenized, except by means of violence and willingful ignorance, within the category of what is called the animal or animality in general. From the outset there are animals and, let's say, *l'animot*. The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animals is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority; it is also a crime" ("Animal" 415-16).

3 "[Le terme d'environnement] suppose que nous autres hommes siégeons au centre d'un système de choses qui gravitent autour de nous, nombrils de l'univers, maîtres et possesseurs de la nature [et] rappelle une ère révolue où le modèle géocentré reflétait notre narcissisme, manière de mépriser le monde." If not indicated otherwise, all translations from the French are my own.

4 In English-speaking cultures, the political field historically distinguishes between animal welfare and ethics on the one hand and environmentalism on the other hand. In contrast, the French-speaking world does not duplicate such discrimination (cf. Delanoy).

mountains, rivers, etc.) on the other side, confronting one another with often irreconciliable logics.[5] Most of the time though, the distinction between zoopoetics/zoocriticism and ecopoetics/ecocriticism happens to be formulated in terms of either focus or scale–ecocriticism usually being granted with an interest in larger-scale systems, inclusive of (but not limited to) individual animal organisms. From this point of view, zoopoetics/zoocriticism and ecopoetics/ecocriticism do overlap.[6] However, even with such careful handling of notions, misunderstandings are not far off.

One critical issue appears to lie in the recurring tendency to give priority to specific objects of study in the process of defining fields (e.g., animals for zoopoetics) whereas one of the main contributions of ecological thinking–the one that makes ecology a "subversive science" according to Paul Shepard and Daniel McKinley–is precisely to depart from a substantive ontology of objects and to replace it with an understanding of reality that claims the primacy and prominence of relationships.[7] Insofar as one remembers the original meaning Ernst Haeckel gave the word "ecology" in 1866–that is, "the whole science of the *relations* of the organism to the environment including, in the broad sense, all the 'conditions of existence'" (transl. in Stauffer 140; emphasis added)–the prefix "eco-" stands as a marker of a relational ontology rather than a morpheme referring to natural objects.[8] From this point of view, tensions between zoopoetics and ecopoetics turn out to be not so much about a binary opposition of their objects of study than a discrepancy between two different logics and ontologies (substantive *versus* relational).

Aiming at exploring a permeable relationship between the two fields, I would like to propose the neologism "zoe-poetics" as an alternative label likely to combine the semantic extension of "*zoo-*"–*zoion* in plural form, meaning all animated creatures–with the non-substantive, non-discrete perspective that the prefix "*eco-*" originally refers to. Drawing mostly on the French academic context where animal studies and ecocriticism have developed as

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5 On this matter, cf., for instance, Callicott, "Animal liberation."

6 Cf. Buell, Heise, and Thornber (430-33) or "the borderland ecocriticism shares, mainly amicably, with critical animal studies" mentioned by Garrard (4).

7 Cf., for instance, Callicott: "The ontological primacy of objects and the ontological subordination of relationship characteristic of classical Western science is, in fact, reversed in ecology. Ecological relationships determine the nature of organisms rather than the other way around" (*Defense* 87).

8 That meaning was lost in the English use of "ecology" according to David R. Keller and Frank B. Golley who argue that "the term's broad current usage reflects little of its origin as it has turned into a synonym for nature or environment" (3).

a joint project,[9] I will first define and characterize theoretically "zoepoetics" as a poetics the object of which is not animals or environments but *le vivant*, understood as a name endorsing an eco-ontological view of all living creatures. I will argue that promoting such an integrative (albeit selective) approach ultimately allows to enlighten the critical power which zoo-poetics and eco-poetics can share in terms of a posthumanist discourse that not only challenges the idea of human exceptionalism but also the myth of man's autonomy. Finally, I will examine one of the few practical challenges *zoepoetics* may pose when considering the issue of narrative representation by looking at French contemporary writer Éric Chevillard's *Sans l'orang-outan*.

Zoe and *le vivant*: Contributions from Ancient Greek and French Languages

At the end of the last century, Giorgio Agamben (3-15) reminded a large audience that the Greeks had two different names for the one and only "life": *bios* and *zoe*. Although one cannot but credit the Italian philosopher for bringing back to light such a widely forgotten distinction, the way he framed it has endorsed the equation of *zoe* and "bare life," understood as a somehow reduced, lesser, excluded form of life in the context of biopolitics.[10] However, a valuable 1976 essay about Dionysian worship by the mythologist Karl Kerényi reminds us of the original distinction between *zoe* and *bios*:

> The word *zoë* … resounds with the life of living creatures. The significance of *zoë* is life in general, without further characterization. When the word *bios* is uttered, something else resounds: the contours, as it were, the characteristic traits of a specified life, the outlines that distinguish one living thing from another…. If I may employ an image for the relationship between [*bios* and *zoë*], … *zoë* is the thread upon which every individual *bios* is strung like a bead, and which, in contrast to *bios*, can be conceived of only as endless (xxxii, xxxv).

Because such a definition emphasizes the contrast between *bios* as the name for a distinct, separated life on the one hand and *zoe* used to refer to a continuous life that evades differentiation in time and space as well as on a

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[9] Cf. Simon ("Animality"): "[R]esearch in France has tended, from the start of its reflections on animality, to connect this question to the environmental question, whereas in the English-speaking world, animal studies and ecocriticism have developed separately" (79).

[10] Cf. the criticism formulated by Derrida in his last seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign* (315-33); or Rosi Braidotti's reprobation about "the being-aliveness of the subject (*zoē*) [being] identified with its perishability, its propensity and vulnerability to death and extinction" (206).

metaphysical level (*zoe* does not draw lines between any of the living creatures according to their alleged spiritual nature) on the other, it allows us to regard it as a proto-Darwinian and proto-ecological concept endorsing a non-discrete view on life–a perspective also conveyed by *le vivant* in contemporary scientific discourse. If the concept–which Barbara Cassin described as untranslatable[11]–is hard to define, it is indeed currently understood as the name for the specific topic life sciences are preoccupied with. It has thus spread since the sixties as a way to depart from the vitalism still implied by "*la vie*" which is considered, in its substantive form, as a "metaphysical residue inherited from old-fashioned theological and animist doctrines despised by positive sciences"[12] (Hoquet 15) and incrementally expelled as such by modern biosciences.[13] Instead, the term *le vivant* now encapsulates a post-Darwinian view on life which takes ecological aspects into account but also tries to distance itself from any metaphysical, historical and synchronic separations between all organisms; a distancing which the ancient Greek *zoe*, by insisting on the pattern of indistinctness, had actually been anticipating.

Both *zoe* and *le vivant* then support a vision that not only challenges anthropocentrism (as well as zoocentrism and its coterminous exclusion of mushrooms, bacteria and plants) insofar as it aims not to distinguish between animate beings but which also questions what has been demeaned by British philosopher Anthony Quinton as an obsolete Newtonian ontology:

> In [the Newtonian conception] the world consists of an array of precisely demarcated individual things or substances, which preserve their identity through time, occupy definite positions in space, have their own essential natures independently of their relations to anything else, and fall into clearly distinct natural kinds. Such a world resembles a warehouse of automobile parts. (qtd. in Callicott, *Defense* 105)

By contrast, and despite the representations language imprint upon our minds, a genuine ecological vision intends to blur boundaries:

> Because we learn to talk at the same time we learn to think, our language, for example, encourages us to see ourselves–or a plant or animal–as an isolated sack, a thing, a contained self. Ecological thinking, on the other hand, requires a kind of vision across boundaries. The epidermis of the skin is ecologically like a pond surface or a forest soil, not a shell so much as a delicate interpenetration. (Shepard 2)

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11 Compare also Stephanie Posthumus' contribution in this volume.

12 "[L]a vie elle-même n'est plus qu'un nom, scorie métaphysique héritée des doctrines théologiques et d'un animisme dont la science positive n'a que faire" (Hoquet 15).

13 French physician Claude Bernard, pioneer of modern biology and medicine, thus had unambiguously claimed (291): "la vie n'est qu'un mot qui veut dire ignorance."

Here, one again finds the vocabulary already used by Kerényi to describe *zoe* and depicting life as a mesh (cf. Morton 15) that cannot be confined to the *punctum* of any individual organism. Assuming a non-discrete concept of life, *le vivant* attempts to avoid the tendency to essentialize separate objects, which is still implicit in terms such as "nature," "animal," or "environment." Therefore, a *zoepoetics* may stand as including *zoion* and *eco* to the extent that it endorses a non-Newtonian, non-essentialist and ultimately non-discrete ontology. As Stephanie Posthumus suggested in a talk given at the University of Angers in May 2015 (to be published), one may arguably contend that the concept of *le vivant* enables to develop an ecocriticism that focuses less on differences, pointing out an alternative way likely to reduce the gap between animal studies and ecocriticism in the English-speaking world.

Experimenting with Non-Discretion: The Example of Éric Chevillard's *Sans l'orang-outan*

When confronting such a theoretical framework with the study of literary texts, one is nonetheless back in a deadlock situation. Is not the faculty to distinguish and draw lines indeed the very condition for figurative representation? Is individuality not the very premise shaping characters?[14] In his etymological survey, Kerényi hence noticed that *bios*, not *zoe*, is the one and only life that can be told in narratives: "Bios [is] the content of each individual man's written and unwritten biography." In contrast to that, *zoe* is "the life with which biology first begins," intended to be explored by science but inherently out of the reach of literary narratives: "The experience of that life which resounded for the Greeks in the word *zoë* is, on the other hand, indescribable" (xxxv). Yet, the neologism *zoepoetics* aims at challenging such epistemic division, emphasizing the creativity of literary language to invent successful ways to represent *le vivant* as a non-discrete form of life that cuts across time and space.

Contemporary French writer Eric Chevillard's *Sans l'orang-outan,* published in 2007, provides an accurate albeit extreme example of the issues raised by ecological ontology, especially when it comes to the representation of (human and nonhuman) animals. The book takes its reader to the moment of the (still) imaginary extinction of the great apes that gives the novel its title, the two last specimens of which have just died at the opening of the

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[14] On this issue of Western conceptions of literary characters being patterned after a Cartesian view of the self as an autonomous and self-reflexive *ego*, cf. Boerher 9-10.

tale. Yet such a disappearance is not described as creating an absence as much as it turns out to affect the human protagonists in their own bodies. To exist without orangutans is to exist "without arms or legs, as if one would suddenly suffer an amputation of several limbs"[15] (Chevillard 16). The whole first part of the narrative is thus dedicated to register the metamorphosis human bodies and existences go through, disclosing in a negative way the solidarity that used to bind orangutans and *Homo sapiens* together:

> [W]e are meant to live with orangutans, on one territory where we share the work, where we exchange favors and expertise in constant interaction. For we share the same destiny for eternity. If one of us is missing, the other one then loses half of his limbs whereas his task becomes twice as big. Here he is: A hemiplegic man asked to hull green peas.[16] (Chevillard 153)

In other words, the ape had been coterminous to the human being whose self had never been autonomous–it used to be merged with the self of the animal and *vice versa*. In that respect, Chevillard's narrative endorses a view of identity and individuality consistent with the axioms of deep ecology: "[O]ne's *own self* is no longer adequately delimited by the personal ego or the organism" (Naess 174). In this book, Chevillard does picture his human protagonists as outlined, discrete, separated figures isolated from other animals, but this condition is concomitantly displayed as the pathological result of a decomposition, as the by-product of fateful cut into the continuous entanglement of life: "Our body experiments with all the ways to be crippled–and there are a lot of ways"[17] (22).

Reversing the old nineteenth-century anxiety about hybridity that took hold of literary narratives in the wake of the Darwinian revolution,[18] Chevillard then displays the experience of purity as a negative one. In his narrative, human beings resent their only-human bodies. They are coping with an ontological solipsism emphasized through the use of many phrases referring to the newly autotelic human condition: "I can slap myself, twist my own

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15 "[S]ans bras ni jambes [et] être amputé soudain de bien des membres."

16 "[N]ous sommes faits pour vivre dans la compagnie de l'orang-outan, sur un territoire où nous partageons les tâches, où nous échangeons services et compétences, dans une interaction constante. Nos destins sont liés de toute éternité. Si l'un de nous manque, l'autre du même coup perd la moitié de ses membres tandis que double sa besogne. Voilà l'hémiplégique mis à écosser les petits pois."

17 "Notre corps expérimente toutes les façons d'être infirme, il y en a."

18 On this point, see Richter as well as Stead 296-327.

nose, there is no one but me within my reach"[19] (17); "a body full of pain, as if our hands couldn't but wring each other and our teeth couldn't but crack our teeth"[20] (35). The first person (singular and plural) refers to both a grammatical subject and a grammatical object, while the text describes such a first-person-omnipresence as the product of a loss. *Sans l'orang-outan* thus depicts a genuine anthropo-egocentric narrowing down of the self, reterritorialized within the circumscribed boundaries of single body:

> But here we are, limited to short movements, to movements close to the body, to self-care. As far as I stretch my arms, I cannot but touch myself again, stroke myself, polish myself…. This body of mine that was opening up spaces for me is now crawling, it does not get out of its rut anymore. Formerly, it seemed to me that I could leave my body behind, my reach was large enough so that I would keep the distance and be able to look and wander elsewhere. I was scratching other backs than my own….[21] (158)

Having lost its ties to others and its ecosystemic "reach," the protagonist becomes static. The name he is given–"Moindre," which means "smaller, reduced" in French–ultimately confirms his status as the monstrous outcome of a disjunctive anthropogenesis that in fact allows the narrative figuration. Here, literary representation is achieved through the tearing apart of what was once unseparated, arousing "dread" ("effroi"; 23) and "horrified astonishment" ("stupeur horrifiée"; 35). The text implicates the traditional poetics of the novel which distinguish between human and nonhuman characters as a prerequisite, yet simultaneously discloses these poetics as corrupt.

In this respect, the last part of the text is worth mentioning. Although the text finally focuses on Moindre and a few acolytes seeking a way to resurrect orangutans in the human body by embracing ethological modes of existence similar to those of the orangutans (an arboreal way of life, brachiation, a frugivorous diet and so on), success will come not from these attempts–which the narrative voice derides–but from another nonhuman animal, namely a tiger. At some point, Moindre decides to unleash a tiger on his

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19 "Je peux me gifler, me tordre le nez, il n'y a plus que moi à portée de ma main."

20 "[U]n corps de douleur, comme si nos mains ne savaient plus que se tordre l'une l'autre, et nos dents briser nos dents."

21 "Mais nous voici réduits aux gestes courts, aux gestes près du corps, au soin de soi. Si loin que j'étende le bras, je ne peux que me tâter encore, me caresser, me polir…. Ce corps qui m'ouvrait l'espace se traîne, il ne sort plus de son ornière. Avant, il me semble que je laissais parfois ma dépouille derrière moi, j'avais assez d'allonge pour tenir la distance et aller voir ailleurs. Je grattais d'autres dos que le mien…."

fellows as a test to reveal how good they prove as orangutans, and the feline devours half of the troupe. Moindre then ironically takes the outcome as a success of those who died, offering the following laudatory eulogy for them: "[T]he tiger regarded you as equal to an orangutans group. *He didn't see any substantial difference*. His deadly attack also stands as a tribute to our efforts and results, you can legitimately feel honored"[22] (179, emphasis added). Under the veil of humor, an earnest discourse about the myth of human distinction and its process of self-validation can be recognized. Following Darwin's argument that "if man had not been his own classifier, he would never have thought of founding a separate order for his own reception" (191), the shift in perspective from human to tiger eliminates the possibility of discrimination between species. From the point of view of the tiger who ate the character named Karpoff "like he would have done with an orangutan, starting with the middle and the flanks and without expressing any surprise or repugnance"[23] (181), human beings are just apes whose meat is the same as–and is confused with–that of orangutans. On a symbolical level, the nonhuman animal then appears as a repository figure of an unprompted, undifferentiated view on life and living creatures, which not only dismisses human exceptionalism but also allegorically enables human protagonists to revive their lost solidarity with the extinct apes. In other words, the tiger's ontology does not make a difference, thus enabling a pattern of indiscrete permeability to find its way back into the poetics of the text.

Furthermore, confusion ends up spreading in the minds of the survivors. As they carry out efforts to become orangutans and because of the absence of the original model, they happen to forget which behaviors were allegedly specific to great apes and which were specific to human beings: "And now everything gets clouded and blurry and we cannot judge anything anymore"[24] (183). Such a global loss of discernment then infects not only the narrator of the text but also the disoriented reader, ultimately proving Chevillard's poetics if not Moindre's anthropo-zoomorphic enterprise as an effective project.

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22 "[L]e tigre vous a considérés à l'égal d'un groupe d'orang-outans. *Il n'a point perçu de différence significative*. Sa charge meurtrière est aussi un hommage à nos efforts et à nos résultats, vous pouvez à bon droit vous sentir honorés."

23 "[C]omme il eût fait d'un orang-outang, en commençant par le centre et les flancs et sans marquer de surprise ou de dégoût."

24 "Voilà que tout se brouille et s'embrouille et nous ne pouvons plus juger de rien."

Conclusion

Chevillard's text ultimately points towards a poetics likely to endorse a genuine ecological view on animated life as yet-to-come. Nonetheless, other works might have been examined which are less aporetic. The experiment with a loss of boundaries Clarice Lispector depicts in her protagonist's meeting with a cockroach in *A Paixão segundo G.H* (1964); Kurt Vonnegut's fantasies of a devolution process undoing disjunctive anthropogenesis in *Galápagos* (1985); Jim Crace's depiction of an immanent afterlife through ecological transubstantiation in *Being Dead* (1999): all these works strive to highlight and narrate the prominence of ecological connections between all living organisms. By doing so, they provide convincing examples of how the so-called "animal question" can be raised from an ecological perspective, and encourage us, as critics, not to think of the two fields of zoo- and eco-poetics as separated ones.

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