

CHEVILLARD'S ALEATORY WORLD: TOWARD A FRENCH POSTEXOTIC LITERATURE

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Eric Chevillard is part of a crop of Minuit writers who come after a period of drought, between the late 60s and the early 80s, when French experimental fiction came to a standstill, and who are heralding a renaissance of French experimental fiction. I call "postexotic novels" these contemporary writings that construct the dynamics of a debate between the ordinary and the extraordinary. They undertake to conflate these terms by constructing a dynamics of the exotic within the paraxial space of banality, that is to say by conflating the unnatural Other with the ordinary and the natural. They also traduce the postmodern abandonment of the unitary construct of self. Here, the Other has been internalized; it has become an inherent part of the self. If there is a difference between the self and the other, it is a *différance* in the Derridean sense of the term. The postexotic novel carries out an effect of displacement of the real, a sabotage of the epistemological edifice of determinism and realism.

The postexotic novel marks the return of the *lisible*, and one could even say that it marks the return of the *déjà-lu*, as the extensive use of pastiche and parody in postexotic novels demonstrates. Unlike the *nouveau roman*, the postexotic novel does not hinge upon the sole primacy of the referent. In that sense, the *nouveau roman* was exotic insofar as it conceived of itself as other, as a semantic and formal elsewhere. The postexotic novel has staked a place for itself within the doxa, and is deconstructing it from the inside-out through parodic means.

In Chevillard's world, events are not inscribed within a logical and deterministic pattern. Rather they seem to result from mere chance, and owe far more to a chaotic conception of the world than to a Cartesian one. Characters act in ways which contradict the normality of their acts and of themselves. Patterns of communication are constantly interrupted by noise as a neverending stream of digressions constantly interrupts the primary plotline. Through this, Chevillard broaches the imponderability of modern life, chaotic and apparently meaningless.

Chevillard builds fictions that confront what we might call, paraphrasing Michel Serres, the "thanatoeratic principle," that is to say a foreordained totalitarian order of things. They seek to swerve away from it, throwing the narrative in unsuspected and liberating directions. Chevillard's narratives are not only addressing the issue of death (through diseases, wars, murder), but death itself serves as a

guiding principle for the narrative progressions of these stories. Furne, the protagonist of *Le Caoutchouc décidément*, rails against the living death, the deadly humdrum of what Flaubert would have called *les idées reçues* but which here takes on endemic proportions and affects most aspects of what we consider normal in our gestalt:

Furne est par exemple hostile au principe des giboulées de mars. Si ce n'était que ça, mais non, il ferait face, ou le dos rond, mais il n'est rien au sujet de quoi il ne trouve à redire, sans avoir à chercher où il trouve, des vices de forme ou de fabrication en toute chose, de graves imperfections, des abus, des petitesse, ce sont ses propres termes, en conclut qu'un remaniement s'impose, une réorganisation globale et méthodique du système en vigueur, puisqu'il ne répond pas à nos besoins les plus élémentaires et contrarie nos rêves les plus légitimes, révisons-le. (7)

Such a complete reorganization of the "système en vigueur" suggests that in order to escape a thanatocratic world where, according to Serres, "there is nothing to be learned, to be discovered, to be invented", where there is "nothing new under the sun of identity" (*Hermès* 100), one needs to question every single facet of human knowledge. One must, in Furne's words, force reality to step back (*Le Caoutchouc décidément* 98). Chevillard's protagonists are like Plato's gadfly, constantly questioning the inexorable order of things. They emblemize what Michel Serres calls the "parasite," a presence which introduces noise and confusion in the production of meaning. Yet, Chevillard's textualities are rigorously constructed from a formal standpoint, and the ontological systems and paradigms built by his protagonists are quite methodical in their own right.

Ironically enough, Chevillard not only borrows heavily from the sum of scientific and literary discourses that constitute the "système en vigueur", but his own style evokes a whole corpus of pedantic and scholastic theses. For instance, Crab, the elusive protagonist of *La Nébuleuse du crabe*, is a rhetorician who follows in the footsteps of Aristotle. But he is as far removed from Aristotelian teleology as one could be:

Crab ne se décide jamais en fonction de l'utilité immédiate que présenterait telle chose par rapport à telle autre...S'il est parvenu à la conclusion que le chien supplantait l'aiguille, dans l'absolu, que le chien est globalement supérieur à l'aiguille, et qu'il doit recoudre un bouton, Crab utilise le chien. On ne manque pas de lui faire remarquer alors, en le voyant peiner sur son ouvrage, qu'avec une aiguille il en serait déjà venu à bout. Et Crab est obligé de lâcher son chien sur ces malins pour leur prouver qu'il a raisonné juste, et même puissamment. (8-9)

For Chevillard's protagonists, any logical demonstration is feasible, no matter how unlogical. As a matter of fact, the example of the dog and the needle is a textbook example of Aristotelian principles. It provides a perfect illustration for both the *demonstratio ad absurdum* (proof obtained through absurd reasoning) and for the *argumentum ad baculum* (appeal to force to win an argument). We soon notice however that here characters might argue for one thing and for its opposite in the same breath. This unnatural use of language and of logic proves that the sole truth is that of the demonstration itself. No light at the end of the tunnel but the marmoreal quality of the *quod erat demonstrandum* (CQFD).

Such aberrant use of the rhetorical tools provided by the Aristotelian tradition allows the narrator to baffle the reader's desire for narrative closure. Not only that but narrative continuity is virtually nonexistent, as digressions constantly interrupt the primary plotline. In fact, digressions actually make up the majority of the text. They constitute a series of logical spinoffs that seem at first to derail the plot. However, it soon becomes clear that instead, they function as apparently random swerves of the narrative, as stochastic moments of semantic and rhetorical self-organization. Each swerve of the narrative, each moment of clinamen, marks another development in Chevillard's "logique déchaînée" (*Préhistoire* 41). The end result does not loom very large here, nor does the fallacy of an ultimate truth. Such prosaic concerns recall of course the poststructuralist critique of the Western metaphysics of depth. Besides, Chevillard's narratives take to task Lacanian and Derridean theories on the endlessness of the signifying chain, by pushing polysemanticity to hyperbolic heights. As for discursive articulations, they become moments of liberation, loci of free-will where the narrative cheats "le système en vigueur:"

Ah, la charnière! permet d'aller et venir en toute liberté, elle assure le lien et favorise le jeu entre deux ordres de réalité distincts, sinon contraires,...elle nous donnera accès à tout partout, en elle réside l'unique vérité tangible. Il y en a toujours une entre ce qui précède et ce qui suit. (*Le Caoutchouc* 125)

Borrowing from the narrative fragmentation of picaresque novels, Chevillard makes an extensive use of the *enchâssements* also favored by seventeenth-century fabulists. But unlike the latter, Chevillard uses the *enchâssements* not so much to provide the fabula with peripetacia than to forego narrative closure.

If such delaying tactics result in the ever-greater complexity of the narrative web, they also result in the multiplication of what Umberto Eco calls "inferential walks," that is to say juncture points in the text where the reader branches out to other related narratives. The infinitely unknowable subject of Chevillard's narratives seems to demand such a discursive and rhetorical explosion. Faced with the elusiveness of his subject, Chevillard lards his own texts with a battery of scientific discourses (from paleontology to entomology, through ornithology, ichthyology, history, mathematics, logic, etymology, literary criticism, phrenology, botanics, geology and zoology, to mention just a few). These in turn trigger a lexical and technical overflow that undermines each time a little more the certainty on which epistemology rests. Language, like logic, repeatedly betrays its limitations. Furne, our literary anarchist, condemns the failure of language since according to him "[le] manque de verbes restreint notre liberté de mouvements" (*Le Caoutchouc* 11-2). Trapped in the prison-house of language, the postlapsarian man can no longer, according to Furne, take the female chimpanzee to ecstasy--a clear sign of his downfall--. In this obvious parody of the Biblical text, he seeks to hide the shame of his fallen state by building an immutable paper fortress of self-perpetuating texts around him. Such fortress would be the sum of human discourses, some kind of monolithic neo-Borgesian library of Babel:

L'Histoire est bien connue. Nous possédons les textes. Les textes se recourent. Souvent, les textes se répètent. Ainsi nous sommes sûrs. La lecture des textes est certes un peu ennuyeuse, mais parce qu'ils se répètent justement, parce que la vérité est unique... l'attente du lecteur est récompensée, car le lecteur des textes n'apprécierait guère de lire une version de l'histoire trop différente de celles

qu'il a déjà lues et qui se rejoignent au point de n'en faire qu'une, la même bonne vieille histoire à chaque fois, la même magnifique aventure, ainsi nous sommes sûrs.
(*Préhistoire* 88-9)

Each of Chevillard's texts emblemizes a process of entropic unraveling of the world that ultimately exhausts itself, along with the text. Each text tries however to survive itself, and to go past its own heat-death, its own demise. This constitutes the crux of what most postextotic narratives are about: how to tell a story that must not end? Some of Chevillard's protagonists believe that the only way to ensure the eternal renewal of their own world passes through attaining perfect silence. Thus, they erase any noise from the system, ensuring the self-perpetuation of a discursive exchange between one and oneself. To do so, they either choose to shut themselves away from the world or to destroy it. Monge, the main character of *Le Démarcheur* shares both the nondescript insignificance of Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* and the murderous anarchy of Blaise Cendrars's *Moravagine*. An old blue-bearded mortician who engraves funeral stones for a company called Marmor, Monge decides to push professional courtesy to its extreme by carrying out, all by himself, the holocaust of the entire human race, and by providing each victim with a personalized inscription on their tomb. We will have guessed that *Le Démarcheur* functions as a parodic *künstlerroman* where writing takes on an eerie performative quality. Writing is murder, murder is writing. Faced with the anguish of the white page, here the pristine marble of the tombstones, Monge, like Mallarmé before him, must fill out the emptiness of the page, until he literally runs out of characters.

Here, the ontological certainty Western philosophy provided man by falls over the wayside. Like Baudrillard's simulacra, modern man has turned into a simulacrum of himself, into his own fictional counterpart:

La fin de la préhistoire fut précipitée par l'apparition de l'écriture. Plus exactement, on considère que l'apparition de l'écriture marque la fin de la préhistoire, que celle-ci en somme s'achève lorsque le récit commence. Présent sur la Terre depuis trois millions d'années, et fatigué, on le serait à moins, immuable en dépit de transformations morphologiques qui l'éloignaient peu à peu du singe sans l'apparenter au tigre pour autant, l'homme devint alors ce personnage de fiction dont les aventures extraordinaires se

poursuivront de livre en livre jusqu'à la disparition de l'écriture, un jour ou l'autre, car ces aventures finiront par lasser à leur tour, tant il est vrai que leur succession rapide et ininterrompue décrit la plus parfaite figure de l'immobilité que l'on ait connue depuis les grandes glaciations du quaternaire. (*Préhistoire* 43)

So much then for the liberating and revolutionary competence of literature. However, despite their railings against literature and its discontents, Chevillard's own fictions try to justify literary activity. They also seek a place for the writer within a fictional environment that threatens to engulf him and strip him of his demiurgic power.

Not surprisingly, Chevillard's fictions leave a significant place to madness which saves from "mediocrity and boredom" (*La Nébuleuse* 12) and which redeems the writer from any subservience to "le système en vigueur." Whether or not this salvation truly takes place, and under which conditions, is as best problematic. However, if there is madness in Chevillard's texts, it is not associated with the supernatural, the fanciful, or even with the out-of-the-ordinary. Wedged in the very heart of the banal, madness deconstructs it from the inside. The real becomes in turn a hollowed-out presence that the author and his fictional doubles set out to rebuild at the same time they carnivalize it. Very methodically, each novel touches upon different kinds of insanity, from the senility of the protagonists of *Mourir m'enrhume* and *Le Démarcheur*, to the schizophrenia *La Nébuleuse du crabe*, through the paranoia of *Préhistoire*.

Madness carnivalizes the real and the text, using the novelistic chronotope as a subversive space. While preserving the stringent inexorability of the demonstration-qua-demonstration, madness allows the narrators to reorganize semes within their respective semantic fields and to transgress semantic boundaries. Semes soon find themselves articulated along random and isotopic links. Given his particular interests, and specifically the problematic relation of man to other species, Chevillard favors some semantic fields: for example, animals appear 175 times in the 114 pages of *Mourir m'enrhume*, 154 times in *Le Démarcheur*, 81 times in *La Nébuleuse du crabe*, 73 times in *Le Caoutchouc décidément* and a meager 70 times in *Préhistoire*. Mentions of animal parts number in the hundreds in *Palafox*. Such exhaustive cataloguing of zoological categories and sub-categories, groups and sub-groups, allows for a topsy-turvy rendition of scholarly discourses as they implode under the pressure of such inflationary practises. At the same

time it forces us to adopt a different reading strategy based on their marginalization.

This permanent carnivalesque madness induces the debunking of all that we usually consider serious thinking, from metaphysics to the hard sciences. Chevallard endeavors to prevent the finality of meaning by constructing the dynamics of a debate between the centripetal impetus of reason and the centrifugal forces of madness. In Bakhtinian fashion, the profoundly dialogic nature of Chevallard's narratives make them loci of subversion, spaces of discontents. Like Michel Serres's parasite, they suck the life out of encyclopedic knowledge and its corollary, rigid discursivity.

Yet, Chevallard's texts celebrate the return of at least one organizing and totalizing feature: the plot. Despite the centrifugal impact of madness on the course of the narrative, the latter functions as a structuring presence, as the very limits of the texts constitute borders which for the artist serve to stop the formidable advance of death. For all the discursive dissemination and profusion, the plotlines of Chevallard are fairly easy to follow. In spite of their semantic inconclusiveness, they do make a point very clearly: in spite of its digressions, the text only goes from A to B. The narrator of *Préhistoire* couches the purpose of the digression in the following terms:

Peut-être ai-je progressé davantage qu'il n'y paraît - peut-être [la digression] constitue-t-elle le plus court chemin d'un point à l'autre, si l'on y réfléchit bien, tant la ligne droite est encombrée. (66)

Indeed, the carnivalization of scholarly texts only amounts to their ludic recombination, and the elements remain the same. Faced with the impossibility of a semantic *tabula rasa*, that is to say the impossibility of revolutionizing the "système en vigueur," the narratives of Chevallard risk the same fallacy than the normative discourses they vampirize.

The only way out of this conundrum is of course death: discursive death through silence, existential death through the terminal stage of evolution--that is to say physical death--or even devolution--which amounts to going from homo-sapiens back to homo-erectus and finally beast--. Having successfully devolved into beasts, we can safely think of evolving again and prevent the entropic termination of the text. Mankind as textual simulacra is bound to repeat itself eternally. And the text has the last word. For Jean Baudrillard: "There is no more fiction that life could possibly confront, even victoriously--it is reality

itself that disappears utterly in the game of reality--radical disenchantment" (148).

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