

Radiant Inventories: A Natural History of the *Natural Histories*

By Christian Bök

Natural history is situated both before and after language; it decomposes the language of everyday life, but in order to recompose it and discover what has made it possible through the blind resemblances of imagination; it criticizes language, but in order to reveal its foundation. If natural history reworks language and attempts to perfect it, this is because it also delves down into the origin of language. It leaps over the everyday vocabulary that provides it with its immediate ground, and beyond that ground it searches for that which could have constituted its *raison d'être*; but, inversely, it resides in its entirety in the area of language, since it is essentially a concerted use of names and since its ultimate aim is to give things their true denomination. (*The Order of Things* 161)

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A Natural History of Southwestern Ontario by Christopher Dewdney is a scientific catalogue that itemizes erotic details in a natural landscape, the entire text presenting itself as a serialized list so far composed of four books: *Spring Trances in the Control Emerald Night*, *The Cenozoic Asylum*, *Permugenesis*, and *Concordat Proviso Ascendant*. Dewdney in *Concordat Proviso* has described this lifelong opus as "a compendium of particulars written from the inside of its subject" (CP 43), an "inventory [of] a personal, regional identity directly informed by natural history" (CP 43), and this compendium parodies two textual traditions simultaneously, not only operating within these traditions, but also operating against them: first, the romantic tradition that depicts nature as a pantheistic avatar of a benevolent deity; second, the scientific tradition that depicts nature as a subdivisible continuum of objective phenomena. Dewdney sustains a contradictory tension between these two traditions by affirming both of them even while denying both of them so that the relationship of the two traditions to each other in a hierarchy of value remains indeterminate and paradoxical. Dewdney stages this bipartite parody in the form of an extended *blazon*, an heraldic description, whose conventions have traditionally informed erotic poetry that enumerates the attributes of a lover, who in this case represents nature itself; yet, unlike the traditional *blazon*, the describer does not reside outside the description, but is actually interpellated within it so that the describer describes an other that is always already the self. The content of the text describes an erotic interpenetration of the describer and the described, an interpenetration that is itself performed in the form of the text. The text is t(r)opologically infolded, in that it does not merely refer to a geological landscape that functions outside the text, but also refers to a semiological landscape that functions inside the text. The text is itself a map

that maps itself into its map of the land.

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The Romance of the World

Dewdney in his "Introduction" to *Predators of the Adoration* makes a comment about the anthology that certainly applies to the *Natural Histories*: "this book is the voice of the land and the creatures themselves, speaking from the inviolate fortress of a primaeval history uncorrupted by humans" (8) -- "a codex of the plants and animals whose technology is truly miraculous, and for whom I am merely a scribe" (8). Stan Dragland in his "Afterword" argues that Dewdney uses the *Natural Histories* to practise "the heightened, shamanistic voice that makes a beautiful, predatory music" (199), a music performed in homage to what Dragland calls a "secular deity" (194). The *Natural Histories* may be interpreted as an extended exercise in what Jack Spicer might call "dictation" (Blaser 274), the process by which a writer eliminates the interference of the self in order to become more receptive linguistically to the transmissions of an "outside" (Blaser 273), a transcendent remoteness, an other normally inaccessible to the self. Dewdney admits to Lola Lemire Tostevin in *Open Letter* that the *Natural Histories* represents a "zone" (84) through which a kind of genetic memory is accessed:

I retrace a certain state of consciousness which is itself a conscious version of the timeless unconscious. In other words it's taking the timeless unconscious into a fully conscious real. It's the reversion of what you might call the unconscious. (84)

The *Natural Histories* claims to be "of two worlds -- the one diurnal men know and that other world where lunar mottled eels stir like dreams in shallow forest water" (ST 15), and the text documents the gradual conversion of one world into the other through a process of transubstantiation: "[a]llowing both these mechanisms to continue operating, we slowly remove and replace their parts with corresponding and interlocking nothings" (ST 15). The form of the text actually performs the process described in the content of the text, for the text translates the reality of the world into the dream of the text, replacing the phenomenal processes of the referent with the differential processes of the signifier, substituting the apparently tangible mechanism of nature for the apparently intangible mechanism of the text. Dewdney in effect reenacts the romantic tradition that confirms the musing poet as a spokesperson for a muted nature; however, Dewdney simultaneously undercuts the mystical overtones of this oracular role.

M.H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism* has argued that romanticism represents "a secularized form of devotional experience" (65), a form of worship without a god: "[r]omantic writers . . . undertook to save . . . the experiential paradigms . . . of their religious heritage, by reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable, as well as emotionally pertinent" (66), doing so largely through meditations upon nature. The *Natural Histories* repeats this romantic revision of spiritual experience by performing the kind of "natural piety" described by

William Wordsworth in the "Intimations Ode" (186), but the *Natural Histories* carries out this project without the romantic suspicion of theoretical science. Wordsworth in his "Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*," for example, distinguishes between poetry and science, privileging the former over the latter by arguing that the former is more humane than the latter since poetry realizes truth through a fertile, emotional discourse, while science realizes truth through a sterile, intellectual discourse (456). Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* has pointed out that romantic writers often regard science with a fascinated suspicion that usually results in an indictment of science, an indictment based in part upon the fallacy that, when a perceptual phenomenon is explained by correlating it with an elementary principle, the explanation necessarily discredits the emotional value of the perception (307). John Keats in "Lamia," for example, criticizes the physicist Isaac Newton for his "cold philosophy" (230) that can "[c]onquer all mysteries by rule and line, / [e]mpty the haunted air" (236-37), and "[u]nweave a rainbow" (238) so that it is reduced to a "dull catalogue of common things" (234). Dewdney, however, responds with a catalogue that undercuts this romantic fallacy by showing that an intellectual, apoeitic study of nature only increases the emotional, poetic appeal of nature. Dewdney in *Open Letter* actually challenges the generic distinction between poetry and science by suggesting that such a distinction arises from a "fear of intelligence based on the notion of a dichotomy between the heart and the head as if intelligence had no heart, therefore to have heart you have to be dumb" (88). Dewdney instead attempts to synthesize this binary opposition by making the scientific seem romantic, while at the same time making the romantic seem scientific. The romantic hierarchy that privileges emotional responses over intellectual responses parallels the romantic hierarchy that privileges a sacred materiality over a sacred spirituality; however, the text intervenes in this romantic tradition by maintaining the latter hierarchy in order to destabilize the former hierarchy.

John Aiken in *An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry*, an eighteenth-century document, decries the romantic use of "the trite and hackneyed fables of ancient poets" (32) and recommends instead that writers indulge in "the accurate and scientific study of nature" (33). The *Natural Histories* obeys this manifesto, in that the text romanticizes nature through a scientific appraisal of it, resorting to a scientific lexicon normally ignored by romantic poets. The *Natural Histories* actually fulfills the prediction of Wordsworth that "[t]he remotest discoveries of the [c]hemist, the [b]otanist, or [m]ineralogist, will be as proper objects of the [p]oet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us" ("Preface" 456). The *Natural Histories*, in keeping with the romantic tradition, uses the textual to materialize the spiritual, and the first book, *Spring Trances*, begins this project with a paraphrase from *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (447) by the cognitive psychologist Gregory Bateson: "Job's sin is that he is pious, the correction for piety is natural history" (ST 10). The *Natural Histories* implies that it sets out to invert the traditional process of spiritual redemption so that the vice of religious piety, a respect for the immaterial, for the transcendent, is converted to the virtue of secular piety, a respect for the material, for the immanent. Dewdney describes this project to Brian Fawcett in *Line* by saying:

I'm confronting people who have not been able to accept the miraculous in their lives, and who've had spiritual or . . . political crutches which defer miracle for them, or which become vehicles for simulating miracles that in themselves paradoxically renounce miracle. . . . A religious system which has the notion of a supreme being is a renouncement of the human miracle. Any kind of system which defers that miracle, any belief system which centres on the immaterial soul . . . -- all become insults to humanity. (72)

The *Natural Histories* attempts to redress this insult by arguing that what has been traditionally considered profane is in fact more sacred than what has been traditionally considered sacred. The text suggests that the material conditions for human existence constitute a profound miracle, a sublime occurrence, whose apparent inexplicability, if not apparent improbability, endows the universe with the quality of a mystery already so wondrous that it does not require a retreat into superstition in order to render it even more wondrous. The text argues that nature is a miracle that can be experienced constantly, intimately, and concretely, without any need for a miracle beyond nature. The text suggests that to attribute the wondrousness of such a miracle to a transcendent agency beyond the immanent event of such a miracle is to detract from the wondrousness of such a miracle, since the one present, the vitalistic miracle actually experienced during life, is denied, renounced, for the sake of the one absent, the mortalistic miracle supposedly experienced after death. The text suggests that the material explanation of nature increases the emotional appeal of the miracle, whereas the spiritual explanation of nature decreases the emotional appeal of the miracle. Southwestern Ontario in this way becomes the setting for a sublunary paradise, whose sacredness paradoxically honours the death of sacredness, "[t]he forest a cathedral, its floor studded with the remains of ancient temples dedicated to unknown gods" (CP 34).

The *Natural Histories* whimsically redefines "[d]eity [as] being the manifold ontogenic synthesis display-herald for the intrinsic & implacable technocracy of homeomorphic evolution" (CA 62). The text uses an obscure discourse to define deity as itself obscure. The text is representative of a deity that is itself representative, for the deity, like the text in which it appears, is not only an exhibitor, a "display," for the technical operations of nature, but also a harbinger, a "herald," for the technical operations of nature. The deity represents to nature, to the "technocracy of homeomorphic evolution," not only what nature is, but also what nature can be, so that the deity in a sense becomes an emblem for both the process of evolution and the product of evolution. The deity is a "manifold ontogenic synthesis," the developing amalgamation of biological diversity, an iconic shorthand for evolutionary progress -- a progress that is itself "homeomorphic" in the sense that evolution deforms nature to make nature conform to another form, but a form that is by definition always already nature, and this subsequent form is never final since this process is "implacable" and thus never fulfilled. Unlike the Hegelian "spirit" that realizes itself through a telic process of finite becoming, whose operation ultimately results in a transcendent condition of omniscient self-awareness, an absolute state of being without negativity, the deity realizes itself through an atelic process of infinite becoming that never ends in a state of

omniscient self-awareness, but continually generates negativity: "[b]y becoming myself I have become someone else" (CP 27). Whereas "God" is traditionally portrayed as a *neumenon*, unchanging and immaterial, the "deity" is portrayed as a *phenomenon*, changing and material; however, both divinities remain pantheistic in that their operations are said to manifest themselves everywhere throughout time. The text, nevertheless, breaks from the spiritual tradition that sees the divine as a transcendental presence immanent within the natural world, a presence that is the creator of its observers rather than the creation of them, and instead the text argues that the divine is an explanatory principle projected by observers through language onto the natural world: "[u]ltimately our cosmos functions as an inhuman, yet intimate, phenomenology to which we impute deistic attributes because we cannot conceive of anything so subtle and complex operating without consciousness as we know it" (CP 43). The text describes the universe as an alien system for explaining the production of its own phenomena, a system to which humanity attributes the hidden operations of a deity that in this case elaborates itself through the physical processes of the natural world processes impartial to the existence of humanity even though humanity remains unique in its ability to engage with such processes by virtue of being conscious. The text, nevertheless, stresses that the deity is itself merely a dream, a phantasma word used to represent a multifaceted reality seen in its shapeshifting totality: "[d]eity being the council of dreams in a display herald for the thousand perfect intrinsic faces perspectivized into a white, convergent morpholusion" (PG 30). The text redefines divinity by mystifying a secular discourse while simultaneously demystifying a sacred discourse.

Dragland argues that Dewdney describes this secular deity through an "abstract definition" (205), a "loaded passage" (205) full of "verbal arcana" (205), whose parodic overtones do not appear to fit the sensual context; however, Dragland perhaps fails to see that the sheer excessiveness of the scientific diction is itself a formalistic sensuality because such hermetic logorrhea may exemplify what Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* calls "the moment when by its very excess verbal pleasure chokes and reels into bliss" (8). The deity, like the text in which it is described, is not an agapic immateriality, but an erotic materiality, as much an expression of the body as an expression of the mind. The deity reincarnates itself textually in the form of an erotic avatar, an hermaphroditic lover, what Dragland calls "the spirit of it all, one not easily labelled as earth mother" (204), an *anima*, a nameless archetype portrayed as a "memory succubus" (ST 27), an "angel of revelation" (CA 73): "[s]he is eros displayed" (CP 27); "[s]he is liquid darkness occult with desire" (CP 26); "[s]he was paradise renewed a tangible & immaculate dream" (CP 18). This avatar is decidedly alien, for "[s]he has slight webs between her fingers" (CA 66), "[h]er piscine features embryonic & dissipated with wisdom" (CP 15); "[h]er spine ends in four extra vertebrae, prehensile as a finger she shoves it up your ass as you come" (CA 66). Sexual intercourse between this "she" and "you" symbolizes a total interpenetration of the alien and the human, of nature and culture, for this deistic avatar is in effect an erotic metonymy for the natural world: "[m]ulti-foliate her orgasms an interlocking network of pure sensual detail rippling through the surrounding forest" (CA 67); "[t]he wisdom of her lineaments curl & vanish into the landscape" (ST 18). Such copulation between the describer and the described, dramatizes the obliteration of

subjectivity when the self loses itself in the other, the two becoming interchangeably conflated as they "[a]scend and merge" (CA 69): "[i]ndistinguishable in the twilight we rub ourselves with dirt & slide mucuous pink into each other again and again, the merging earth our union" (CP 30); "[y]ou come rubbing against me we come androgynous we come first as two boys & then as two women" (CP 30); "you . . . watch your own face decay under the withering gaze you yourself have spawned in her" (CA 64). Such "amphetamine lovemaking" (CA 71), traditionally considered debased by manichean spirituality, becomes a physical avenue of personal transcendence, each self losing itself utterly in the other. The text pays homage to the body of this lover, the text always "[a] vowel away from the discrete crystal wherein her rude beauty gives way to angels" (CP 16); moreover, the text portrays nature as a system that produces a text to portray nature: "[m]y adoration the natural fulfillment of her sacral narcissism" (CP 27). Human consciousness is in other words a natural phenomenon that provides the recursive means for the natural world to express its adoration for itself.

The *Natural Histories* is what Dewdney calls a "ritual text" (CP 43), an act of devotion, complete with its own refrains: for example, each book begins and ends with the same hieroglyphic drawing, 1 a personal paraph, an heraldic seal what Dewdney has called "[t]he emblem, the gate, the blessing and the word" (PG 8), a written key to a private mythology, a secular set of four images that represents an hermetic formula for personal transcendence:

1) The first image, the *emblem*, depicts a stylized scarab, perhaps one of the "[l]ocal Scarabidae" (ST 26) that have developed "elaborate horns & attachments" (ST 26), a beetle deformed by an extrapolated evolution. Dewdney in *Open Letter* describes the scarab as an example of "Platonic genericism" (84), as a material index for an implicate order, for "a regenerative notion" (84) that combines the sacred and the profane, something "quasi-pantheistic" (84). Dewdney recounts the Egyptian belief that a scarab rolling a ball of dung across the ground provides an allegory for a deity rolling the sun across the sky (84), and he personalizes this mythology so that the *emblem* becomes an allegory for a secular deity, the material process of natural evolution.

2) The second image, the *gate*, depicts two viperfish, two deepsea carnivores, suspended back to back with a narrow space between them an image in which the fish appear to threaten any passage around them and thus oblige a person to navigate through the space between them in order to attain the goal beyond the gate that they form: whereas the *emblem* is a tangible, physical icon that incites a curiosity about the phenomenal principles that inform it, the *gate* represents the perilous, conceptual threshold that must be crossed in order for the secret of the *emblem* to be revealed. The *gate*, with its deepsea guardians who live in perpetual darkness, becomes a traditional analog for the unconscious realm, out of which some insight is poetically derived.

3) The third image, the *blessing*, depicts a bat emitting what appears to be a sound-beam for echolocation, a bat that parodies the traditional depiction of the divine annunciation, the image of a dove emitting a light-beam for illumination: whereas the dove suggests the

divulgence of a sacred, diurnal secret, the bat suggests the divulgence of a profane, nocturnal secret. The *blessing* perhaps represents the moment of revelation, in which the secret of the *emblem* is revealed to the poet who, like the blind bat, explores the world by means of a linguistic echo.

4) The fourth image, the *word*, depicts the grammatical formula for generating all pronounceable phonemes in the language, a word that is itself the blueprint for all words. The *word*, however, is not strictly speaking a transcendental signifier, in that the *word* is not portrayed as a monosemic sign whose meaning is transparent, but portrayed as a polysemic sign whose meaning is opaque. The *word* has no specific referent, but contains within itself the potential to generate an infinite number of possible meanings. The *word* displays the material preconditions for signification.

The four images together map out a kind of a mystical initiation, whose spiritual overtones are undercut by the parodic substitution of secular imagery for sacred imagery. This initiation moves from the world to the word, but does not convert the material into the immaterial so much as convert the referent into the signifier, the text of nature into the nature of the text. The initiation reveals that behind the *emblem* is merely the *word*, behind one representation is merely the possibility of another representation. Science is merely a homonym for signs.

The *Natural Histories* is also ritualistic because each book features an apostolic witness to a superhuman grandeur: each prologue details the firsthand account of someone who has actually been trapped inside a tornado and has survived to tell the tale. Dewdney in *Concordat Proviso* points out that such a sublime encounter is "a primal, sacred experience of nature's most extreme and random violence" (43); however, "it is a cruelty without malice derived from an impartiality at the heart of nature, and the universe, for that matter" (43). Dewdney goes so far as to suggest that the tornado provides material evidence for some hermeneutic principle behind the phenomenal universe: "that which is most completely out of control most clearly reveals the workings of the unseen machinations" (CA 64). Dewdney in *Open Letter* describes the tornado as "an icon" (92), a concrete incarnation of an abstract transcendence, a manifest agency for the Spicerian "outside" perhaps, since "the tornado is the other . . . , the annihilation of self . . . , or the opposite of consciousness and therefore, hyper-consciousness" (92), a superhuman conduit for a deistic principle, a conduit eloquently depicted by Dewdney in "Elora Gorge" where he writes: "[t]ornados are the umbilicus of earth attached to the placenta of heaven" (103). The *Natural Histories* documents "the irresistible current of approaching storms" (ST 23), whose destruction of houses, all "exploded by lightning" (ST 38), coincides textually with the moment "[w]hen our foreheads glide through each other's symmetry, as far apart & identical as colliding galaxies" (ST 38) so that "the room breaks into flashing white shards of interstellar nothingness" (ST 38), "[t]his being no ordinary storm" (ST 38). The *Natural Histories* echoes a passage by Dewdney in *Alter Sublime* where he describes a person who is destroyed when merging with a reflection in a mirror: "you screaming . . . as your foreheads plunge through each other's foreheads through each other's symmetry" (18), "[t]he world breaking into flashing white shards of interstellar nothingness" (18) -- a cataclysmic event that dramatizes

the total annihilation of consciousness when the self merges with the other, when no difference exists between the subject of the *Annunciation* and the subject of the *Annunciation*. The tornado is in effect one hallmark of this annihilation, particularly when the reader considers that electrical storms can occur not only climatologically, but also neurologically.

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The Science of the Word

Geoffrey Ward in "A Higher Fiction" observes that, in the *Natural Histories*, "language is used not as a window to the world . . . , but is itself emphasized in its opacity" (87): for example, "classifications given to rocks . . . are drawn from speech and . . . are inseparable, not from the rock, but from the categorizing powers of language" (87). Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* emphasizes that "the theory of natural history cannot be dissociated from that of language" (157) since "it concerns a fundamental arrangement of knowledge of beings so as to make it possible to represent them in a system of names" (157): "[t]o know an animal or a plant . . . is to gather together the whole dense layer of signs with which it . . . may have been covered" (40). Natural history has historically restricted itself to a complicated taxonomy, a categorical continuum, into which all nature may be presumably fitted without distortion. Nature is read as a list of species, the text of a hierarchy, a great ladder in which each rung is separated from its neighbour by only the smallest possible difference. The *Natural Histories* operates within this tradition by providing a prolonged taxonomy similar in tone to a *blazon*, the description of an armorial bearing: "[t]here is a heraldry in creation unseen" (CP 20); "its markings are the summation of military heraldry" (CA 52); "[t]he lions & unicorns we wish to speak through" (CA 73); "[o]n a field sable a lynx rampant" (CP 33). Dewdney admits to David Heinemann in *Public Works* that "there is lots of heraldic imagery" (51) in the *Natural Histories* and that "some of the major heraldic devices for summer, especially in southwest Ontario . . . are the summer thunderstorms that move up and down the Thames Valley, and thunderheads in the distance, and heat lightning at night" (51). The *Natural Histories* itemizes a radiant inventory, but unlike traditional taxonomies, this extended list is itemized without apparent order as though to preserve the implicit randomness found in nature rather than impose an explicit orderliness upon such a nature. Dewdney in *Open Letter* remarks that the text "has a great deal of randomness in it" (85) and that "[t]he random is our existential dilemma to a certain extent, the basis of everything, the background hum of the real" (85). Lists have been traditionally perceived as reductive texts, the arbitrary fragmentation of a larger continuum, but this text works within this reductive tradition in order to work against it.

Spring Trances, for example, enumerates a "Bibliography of Creatures" (42-45), creatures that include not only animals and plants, but also climates and locales, all of which inhabit an environment that is itself regarded as a composite creature, whose every part represents a book to be read, a living text to which the *Natural Histories* is itself a living intertext -- living in the sense that, according to Dewdney in "Parasite Maintenance" (19), language

itself describes all the qualities of an evolving lifeform. Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* has observed that, in the logocentric tradition, nature is a book in which a divine mandate is read: "[o]ne must constantly go back toward . . . the 'holy voice of nature,' that merges with the divine incscription and prescription; one must encounter oneself within it, enter into a dialogue within its signs, speak and respond to oneself in its pages" (18). Dewdney subscribes to this logocentric tradition, while simultaneously disrupting it, positing the authority of such a book, while at the same time provisionalizing the natural law that such a book implies. *The Cenozoic Asylum*, for example, features a supplementary list entitled "Grid Erectile" (CA 51-54), an incantatorial series of reasons, all of which appear to represent responses to a question without one authoritative answer, but with many relativized answers. The "Grid" appears to provide justifications for the existence of Southwestern Ontario, an entity whose manifold characteristics are "at the infinite disposal of curiosity" (CA 52), an entity that is perhaps the text of the world, if not the world of the text: each entry in the list not only provides a reason for the existence of some facet of the landscape, but also provides simultaneously a reason for writing about such a facet of the landscape. Dewdney in "Associational Areola as Grid Erectile" associates the "Grid" not with a rigid matrix of denotations, but with a fluid matrix of connotations (71), and indeed the structure of the "Grid" is determined not by logical causality, but by free association. The "Grid" is not already erected so much as potentially erectible, a grid more provisional than absolute, more polysemic than monosemic, more erotic than necrotic, a grid determined by reasons, not by results, by process, not by product. *Concordat Proviso* repeats this ritual of lists with a "Litany of Attributes" (11-13), an erotic poem in the tradition of the *blazon*, an heraldic description of feminine beauty, an incantatorial list that in this case itemizes each characteristic, each "miracle," of a female form, whose anonymity suggests an archetype, an *anima*: "The spirit I worship there" (CA 64). Luce Irigaray in *The Speculum of the Other Woman* observes that, throughout patriarchal history, the female has been aligned with an anonymous nature, an amorphous substrate, that passively awaits definition by the male (179). Dewdney appears to reiterate this phallogocentric dichotomy, while at the same time undercutting it elsewhere in the text by recurrently blurring the distinction between the male describer and the female described so that the gender positions are often rendered transsexual, ambivalent. The *Natural Histories* tries to provide a list that does not fix details into place so much as touch them, then let them go.

The *Natural Histories* attempts to portray a heightened consciousness that perceives the world through a multifaceted, consensual framework, irreducible to a fixed viewpoint in spacetime: "[t]he forest is filled with eyes" (18) even though "the secret harmony of all life unfolds itself in silence and without witness" (ST 19); moreover, "[e]vents occur linearly so densely they are viewed as simultaneous" (ST 21), "each second a prodigal return" (CP 36). Dragland observes that "the field of sensation . . . is continuous within a de-served source of observation" (204), within "a consciousness raised to an almost painfully rich receptivity" (204), a consciousness "transferable to other locales . . . because it involves a way of looking at surface features in terms of a millennial palimpsest that exists everywhere" (190) -- or in the words of the poem: "[t]here can be no highlights if there is no point of view" (CA

67). Everything, including the reader, is implicated in the description for "[y]ou are all that you see" (CP 21), and the ambiguity of this quote suggests that the reader is not only convergent with the land, but also convergent with the text itself. Dragland observes that often "verbal units" in the text are "incredibly dense concretions of metaphor built on bunched adjectives" (204), excessive conglomerates by which the text tries to defy sequentiality in favour of simultaneity: "[t]he sentences often lack verbs, as though it would be stretching things to speak in terms of action through time and space which are themselves collapsed" (204), and since there is no narrative progression "[o]ne could in principle read the pieces in different sequence" (204). Dewdney deploys a textual logic that is associational, not propositional; consequently, each word sets in operation a whole connotative network, like ripples expanding in a pond, "[t]he smallest perturbation being transmitted through the whole undiminished" (CP 16): "[a] single note triggers intangible symphonies, their strange harmonies blend into the fabric of all sound" (CP 22). Dewdney in "Associational Areola as Grid Erectile" points out that, when processing a word, the nervous system relies on myriad circuits, each carrying a different part of the information (71) -- circuits that can be haywired via poetry so as to induce synaesthesia, the hypercognitive condition of perceptual interference. The *Natural Histories* portrays itself as an "[i]nterference text" (CA 64), in which language both elucidates and obfuscates. "Words unable me to speak to you" (CP 18), the text declares, using a pun on the word "enable" to communicate paradoxically that the text cannot communicate. Language, like camouflage, is one of the means by which "intelligence formulates its own disguises" (ST 18), and the text, like a pool, "magnifies its own refractive distortion" (CA 58), widening the breach between the signifier and the referent. Such distortion, however, does not decrease the accuracy of representation, because representation is always already the distortion of a distortion; instead, the text, paradoxically enough, uses synaesthetic techniques not to disguise a meaning, but to intensify it: "this meaning not camouflage but magnification" (ST 20); "[t]he camouflaged wings of the moth are pure representation" (CP 32). Synaesthetic confusion becomes the hallmark of representational accuracy: "[m]etaphorical objects, the mood of foliage & stones, are fictional labyrinths of synesthesia, mimics of the virtual inhabitants" (PG 31). Interference is in effect merely another form of information.

The *Natural Histories* not only refers to an exterior, geological landscape, but refers simultaneously to an interior, semiological landscape. The text portrays nature as a text: "there are a thousand voices in the rapids" (CP 16); "cedar leaves and twigs form an undecipherable mass of hieroglyphics" (ST 25); "[t]he forest roots a semiology we can just barely comprehend" (CP 25). The text, like the forest, is "[a]live with self representation" (29) because the text refers directly to the reading process by which the text refers: "Fovea Centralis now moving through the words" (CA 63) as spectrally as "some hand or shadow moving through the words" (ST 13-14). Just as the eye of the reader supposedly animates the words as it reads across the linear surface of the text, so also does the eye of the deity supposedly animate the linear surface of time. The deity is an endless becoming that signifies the always postponed merging of a self with its othera physical process similar in operation to a textual process, *différance*, insofar as meaning never coincides with itself, but always

diverges from itself. The deity is perhaps an inexhaustible secret that informs not only the text of nature, but also the nature of the text, for behind every emblematic representation of some secret is merely another emblematic representation of the same secret: "[b]ehind manifestation is manifestation" (ST 68) -- meaning endlessly postponed. The text asserts that "[t]here is a path for you here if you see it" (ST 17), and the ambiguity of the deictic "here" suggests that the text not only provides a helpful commentary for a hiker exploring the land, but also for a reader exploring the text. The metaphor of the path (con)textualizes nature, while simultaneously describing the syntagmatic process of textual (re)construction: the text, like the path, is a form of "mnemonic calisthenics" (CP 23), an exercise that becomes "a dance, a re-enactment" (CP 23), "an encoded history, the cumulative response of prior travellers to a given topography" (CP 23). The text, like the path, is "an intra-species engineering project, a passive collaboration" (CP 33) between, in this case, an ordinary writer and all subsequent readers, each of whom (re)interprets the text, thus changing the intertextual context through which the text is subsequently (re)interpreted: the text, like the path is "a sequence of implicit responses which every traveller not only recounts but alters slightly with their passing" (CP 23). The text suggests that, despite its apparent randomness, a travelled path, an implicit order, can be imposed upon it, discovered within it, since "[a] path is the least resistance" (CP 21), "the most expedient solution of opposite destinations" (CP 28), an efficient route of transmission around interference by means of interference. The dissonant syntax of the text, like the causal progress of events, is "[a] temporal music where each successive note is justified only by its predecessor" (CP 20), "[a] harmony such that the edge of dissonance suspends the speed of beauty" (CP 20).

Dewdney in "The Twilight of Self-Consciousness" has described the *Natural Histories* as an exercise in what he calls "Manual Precognition" (93), a process by which "a piece of writing . . . is written back through itself" (93). Dewdney explains that he writes ten pages, then erases all undesirable parts, whereupon he fills the resultant blanks with the continuing text so that the writing anticipates itself: "[t]he leading edge of the writing is carried back through itself in the blanks, the thread through the eye of the needle, the blanks left by the automatic editor" (93). "Manual Precognition" in effect formalizes the creative process described by Dewdney in "Writing":

[T]he natural trajectory of a written train of thought elaborates an implicit order. The first sentence carries within it the blueprint for the whole subsequent work, much as an embryo contains the code for the adult organism. . . . Unlike an uncovered law, however, the progeny of the original sentence can mutate & return to the site of the inception to alter it, like an endlessly self-manipulative teleology. Not only is such the atemporal & incestuous nature of literature, but also the paradigm of consciousness itself. (73)

The *Natural Histories* not only reveals an implicit order in nature, but also reveals an implicit order in itself. The text is portrayed as a living process of self-reflexive revision. The text anticipates itself in the sense that the text echoes itself proleptically via a

series of subtle refrains, of *repetends* lexical units that recur with slight changes, as though the text recombines itself while sustaining a fundamental structure, a process not unlike the permutations of the genetic code. The *repetend*, like a detail in a landscape, is perhaps "an infinite part of the pattern which regenerates itself with its own repetitive logic" (ST 15). Such *repetends* include the following examples: "an abacus in the gravitational field of the moon" (ST 13, CA 58); "some hand or shadow moving through the words" (ST 13-14, ST 24); and "there is a path for you here if you see it" (ST 17, CP 18). Dewdney in "Writing" observes that "[t]he whole of a work of literature can be inferred from its parts as the parts can be inferred from the whole" (73), and indeed these *repetends* are merely the microscopic counterparts to a macroscopic repetition, since these modulated refrains are extended to encompass the structures of entire books in the series.

Permugensis, for example, is described by Dewdney in *Line* as a "cut-up" of the first two books (82): the third is "A Recombinant Text" (7), a *repetend* for the first two, both of which are interspliced together, their syntagmatic chains both translated and recombined in the same way that an helical chain of deoxyribonucleic acid is replicated with alterations in the course of sexual reproduction. The *Natural Histories* not only describes the erotic processes of nature in its content, but also performs such erotic processes in its form: the text interfuses the two books, permuting their contents, their intrinsic characteristics, their *genotypes*, in order to produce a third book different from its predecessors, yet nevertheless preserving the fundamental structure of their forms, their extrinsic characteristics, their *phenotypes*. *Permugensis*, for example, begins with the following lines composed of interspersed fragments excerpted from both the beginning of *Spring Trances* and the end of *The Cenozoic* -- textual sources indicated by way of editorial insertions:

There is a second order of darkness [CA 72] and lens of distance [ST 13]. Brick walls radiating tangible heat at [CA 72] night flowering in the inky strata [ST 13] of far storms [ST 13]. Limestone corridors of stone [ST 13] the miniature jungle of a [CA 72] rainless [ST 13] summer [CA 72] day in hot August [ST 13]. The fingers on vacant F.M. patios at night [CA 72] Fragonard brain coral [ST 13]. Sun spotted [ST 13] from a starry pasture [CA 72]. (PG 13)

Permugensis continues in this way to absorb the first two books into itself, but its membrane is only semi-permeable. The recombinant text usually preserves the integrity of both the original lexicon and the original syntax, but nevertheless some information is lost in the course of replication, and the recombinant text sometimes features minor mutations, usually limited to changes in articles, prepositions, and tenses "genetic errors" that not only accommodate the linguistic transcoding, but also increase the diversity of future permutations. The recombinant text actually maps the forward progress through the first book onto the backward progress through the second book, perhaps superimposing these opposite trajectories in order to suggest a textual conflation of the future and the past, the confluency of temporally disparate events.

The *Natural Histories* in fact makes explicit the recombinant

splicing that characterizes all intertextuality. Roman Jakobson in *Main Trends in the Science of Language* argues that "among all the information-carrying systems, the genetic code and the verbal code are the only ones based upon the use of discrete components which, by themselves, are devoid of inherent meaning but serve to constitute the minimal senseful unmeaning in the given code" (50). Thomas A. Sebeok in *American Signatures* emphasizes the homologies between linguistic structures and biogenetic structures by arguing that, because "[r]eproduction is . . . information replication, . . . another sort of communication" (157), "the genetic code must be regarded as the most fundamental of all the semiotic networks, and therefore as a prototype for all the other signaling systems used by animals, man included" (158). The *Natural Histories* implies that all linguistic operations are biogenetic by virtue of the fact that they function by translating, by recombining, an already given code, a process during which some information is omitted, repressed, or altered. *The Cenozoic Asylum* begins with an epigraph (55) from *Chance and Necessity* by the molecular geneticist Jacques Monod, who writes: "it is legitimate to regard one of the fundamental statements of information theory, namely that the transmission of a message is necessarily accompanied by a certain dissipation of the information it contains, as the theoretical equivalent of the second law of thermodynamics" (198-99). The conservation of energy implies that information is necessarily subject to the effects of entropy. The transmission of data, be it in the form of a genetic code, a computer program, or a written poem, means that the information is necessarily subject to interference, incoherency, and mistranslation. The second law of thermodynamics in a sense provides a scientific justification for the principle that all interpretation is itself misinterpretation: every decoding is merely another encoding. The text retranslates the text of nature into another text that is itself retranslated by the nature of the text.

. . .

The *Natural Histories* ultimately blurs the difference between nature and culture, between the world and the word, so that the two become interchangeable. Moreover, the *Natural Histories* sustains a parodic tension between the romantic and the scientific, doing so by substituting the terms of a religious piety for the terms of a secular piety. Nature as text and text as nature are both deified as an endless becoming, an implacable desire, whose natural identity with itself is continually postponed. Dewdney in "The Twilight of Self-Consciousness" actually calls himself a "haemophilic to regionalism" (87), and his regionalist sensibility informs his attempt to portray Southwestern Ontario as a kind of sublunary paradise. Dewdney structures his description of the regional landscape as a list of particularities, a list attained by trying in vain to obliterate the difference between self and other, between the describer and the described: "[t]he forest a room we dissipate into, particularize" (*CP* 36). Dewdney tries in the end to depict "a universe where what we consider uncanny here occurs almost ten times as frequently" (*ST* 30), a universe that is none other than this universe in which, according to Dewdney, miracles often go unnoticed due to an inattention to its details.

Christopher Dewdney has been kind enough to provide valuable hints about the significance of his hieroglyphic paraph, and Danny O'Quinn deserves special acknowledgement for confirming the critical applicability of Michel Foucault to this discussion.

1. *Permugenesis* begins with this hieroglyphic drawing, but does not end with it because of an error made during publication. Dewdney has explained that, despite the absence of the drawing, its presence at the end of the text is intended and presumed. [\[back\]](#)

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