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"Surprising, Rare, Unconceivable": Animal Wonders in the Exotic Tradition

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Abstract: From Herodotus onwards, the European tradition offers a rich record of wonderment as a primary constituent of humans' response to animals. According to Philip Fisher, "the experience of wonder continually reminds us that our grasp of the world is incomplete" (24). This article seeks to trace the changing function of wonder in response to nonhuman species as it manifests in the literary record. The first part of the discussion centers on the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Focusing on the writings of Christopher Columbus, Antonio Pigafetta, René Descartes, and Aphra Behn, it explores how Europeans experienced the transformation from medieval to early modern ways of understanding the nonhuman world through encounters with astonishing species of animals previously unknown to them. This transformation was accompanied by radical shifts in the systems of knowledge that had previously been brought to bear on nonhuman living beings. The second part of the article conducts a brief examination of the role of wonder in the more recent literary tradition of magic realism, with a focus on the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, and Yann Martel.

Keywords: wonder, animals, exotic, magic realism, Behn

In his speech accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982, Gabriel García Márquez began by invoking a menagerie of exotic animals that might have come from the pages of his own fiction but actually derived from an early European encounter with the fauna of South America:

> Antonio Pigafetta, a Florentine navigator who went with Magellan on the first voyage around the world, wrote, upon

> his passage through our southern lands of America, a rigorously accurate account that nonetheless resembles a venture into fantasy. In it he recorded that he had seen hogs with navels on their backsides, legless birds whose hens laid eggs on the backs of their mates, and others still, resembling tongueless pelicans, with beaks like spoons. He wrote of having seen a misbegotten creature with the head and ears of a mule, a camel's body, the legs of a deer and the whinny of a horse. . . .
>
> This short and fascinating book . . . even then contained the seeds of our present-day novels. ("Nobel Lecture")[1]

Pigafetta's account demonstrates some of the most prevalent strategies by which, within the longstanding European tradition of the exotic, strange new phenomena are initially apprehended—in particular, the assimilation of the never-before-encountered by means of the familiar. As Graham Huggan points out, the exotic

> is not, as is often supposed, an inherent *quality* to be found "in" certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places; exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic *perception*—one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery. . . . Exoticism . . . might be described as a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity. (13; emphasis in original)

Pigafetta exemplifies this exchange between strangeness and familiarity, between the domestic and the mysteriously other, when he refers to birds that have "beaks like spoons," which simultaneously conjures up a weird-looking new species and domesticates it by association with the most mundane of household implements. Similarly, he takes the quotidian pig and exoticises it by describing it with a navel on its backside. Then, in the manner typical of those who document monstrously strange creatures, he stitches together components from four well-known species—mule, camel, deer, and horse—to envisage a quadruped

that seems far-fetched in its entirety but immediately recognisable in its parts. The result is the kind of suspended dialectic described by Huggan: the creatures appear all the more strange because the familiar has been outlandishly redeployed; at the same time they are all the more recognizable as occupants of a category of strangeness that is itself highly familiar—at least, to the sixteenth-century reader of (for example) Marco Polo, Sir John Mandeville, or the medieval bestiary.

Deploying what Huggan calls the "semiotic circuit" of exoticism in this way, Pigafetta also exemplifies the operation of a particular mode, category, experience, or strategy of the exotic that was both potent and crucial in his particular historical moment—a form of exoticism commonly and suggestively attached to accounts of animals: the *wondrous*. The purpose of this article is to explore historically some of the functions and effects of the particular kind of wonder evoked by exotic animals. My discussion looks in two different directions from two disparate moments that meet in the passage above: the first part will trace wondrous animals backwards and forwards from the early sixteenth century, the moment at which Pigafetta writes; the second will look backwards and forwards from 1982, when García Márquez paraphrases Pigafetta in his Nobel speech.

As for the notion of wonder itself, what it signifies and how it functions varies widely, depending on historical and geo-cultural context. In preliminary and general terms, though, I am interested first in thinking about wonder not as a system of meaning, knowledge, or belief but rather as a structure of feeling in which meaning, knowledge, and belief are held in suspension. Second, I am interested in what happens following that moment of suspension or epistemological giddiness.[2] Philip Fisher, tracing the "aesthetics of wonder" through European philosophy, writes that it "has to do with a border between sensation and thought" (6). No wonder, then, that wonder (like other forms of exoticism) proves to be most unpredictable in its effects: it can act as either a challenge or an invitation to meaning, a crisis in belief or a promise of new belief, a recognition of the limits to knowledge or a motivation to break through them.[3]

I.

Exotically wondrous animals have found their way into the narratives of historians and travellers since ancient times. As early as the fifth century BCE, Herodotus described phoenixes, winged serpents, griffins, and gold-digging ants the size of foxes. The archive of exotic species was diligently added to by classical writers like Ctesias (fifth century BCE), Aristotle (fourth century BCE), Lucretius (first century BCE), Pliny the Elder (first century CE) and Aelian (second century CE) (Nigg 37–91). Subsequently, other traditions made their contributions. In the *Voyage of Máel Dūin*, written in Old Irish in the tenth century, mariners are scared away from landing on a remote island by the appearance of "a great beast" that "stretched itself, vigorously revolving its bones within its loose skin" (Matthews and Matthews 473). Two centuries later, Marco Polo assures his readers that there are birds big enough to carry away elephants in Madagascar (215), dog-headed men in the Andaman Islands (219), and unicorns with spiny tongues in Java (256). Similarly, the narrator of the popular fourteenth-century *Mandeville's Travels* insists that he has seen barnacle geese hatching from logs and vegetable lambs budding in trees (Mandeville 165) and describes snails so big "that three or four men can shelter in their shells, as if in a little house or lodge" (133).

It is in the medieval bestiary, though, that wondrous animals achieve their most vivid and durable expression, compiled into a single, dedicated, stable, and systematic format—a tried-and-true formula dating back to the second-century *Physiologus*. In these texts, marvellous qualities are ascribed not only to mythological creatures like the phoenix, basilisk, and unicorn but also to extant—albeit exotic—fauna. Examples include the panther, a "very beautiful and tame" animal who, upon waking, breathes out a "very sweet smell that seems to contain every kind of scent" so that other animals "gather from far and near" to follow him (Barber 31).[4] In this regard, the panther is an emblem of Christ, who after his resurrection "pours out sweetness" to draw souls to salvation (31). Most of the bestiary's exotic species are given theological meanings in this way. The antelope, who uses serrated antlers to "saw down great tall trees and fell them to the ground," signifies "you, O Man," for whom "the Two Testaments serve you as horns, with the help

of which you can fell and root out all bodily and spiritual vices" (34). On the other hand, the whale, who lies basking on the ocean surface until sailors mistake his back for an island and make landfall, at which point the whale dives and takes them down to the depths, represents the devil who plunges down to "the fires of Gehenna" with those who mistake his promises for secure foundations on which to build their lives (204).

Yet the bestiaries are not solely concerned with the reinforcement of Christian moral theology. They are also motivated by—and enjoyed for—the evocation of pleasurable wonder and the savour of the exotic. Their compilers take abundant delight in describing and illuminating creatures and creaturely behaviours that have no symbolic application at all. To take just one example, when the medieval bestiarist describes Harz birds (named after their home in the mountains of Germany), whose "feathers shine in the darkness, so that, however dark the night, they . . . serve to light the way," and adds nothing further, he is clearly including this entry purely for its marvellous effect (Barber 145).[5]

However far-fetched they may seem, though, the delights of the bestiary are mainly well-worn and recognisable ones. They repeat conventions for representing exotic otherness that derive from long-established and familiar authorities. The bestiarist could assert with complete confidence the real existence of the phoenix because of the infrangible line of scholarly authorities who had done so previously, from the writer of *Physiologus* back to Aelian, Pliny, and Ovid and thence all the way back to Herodotus and even the Bible (according to one possible translation of Job 29.18).[6] What is different about Pigafetta's brief South American "bestiary," then, is its inspiration by actual encounters with species that were genuinely new to him, and to all Europeans. In this and many other ways, from the end of the fifteenth century onwards, the rapid outward expansion of Europe through exploration, trade, piracy, the slave trade, and colonization meant that the relatively secure conventions for representing distant climes and fauna—those represented in medieval bestiaries and travellers' tales—were thrown into crisis by the exponentially increased exposure to locations that were, to Europeans, radically novel. The result was that the category of the exotic and the

mode of wonder induced by it generated new forms, gained much greater force, and became still more unpredictable in the meanings and effects they could generate.

In his influential essay "Marvelous Possessions," Stephen Greenblatt analyzes Christopher Columbus' description of his arrival in the New World. He warns that, in reading such accounts—and of course the same applies to Pigafetta's narrative—we must

> resist the drift towards normalizing what was *not* normal. We can demonstrate that, in the face of the unknown, Europeans used their conventional intellectual and organizational structures. . . . What else would we expect? But such demonstrations do not—or should not—efface the incommensurability, the astonishing singularity, of the contact initiated on October 12, 1492. (54; emphasis in original)

As Greenblatt points out, European contact with foreign peoples and places (and, I would add, species) had virtually always previously occurred "across boundaries that were to some degree, however small, porous" (54): we might think here of the very rare but vividly documented contact with the Far East exemplified by Marco Polo's travels. By contrast, nothing in history had prepared Europeans for the encounter with the Americas and their inhabitants, both human and nonhuman. For cultures confronted by evidence of previously unknown peoples, territories, artefacts, and animals, exoticism and wonder became newly important and unstable mechanisms for processing the influx of new data.

I distinguish—although Greenblatt does not—between two main modes of wonderment that operate in the examples he quotes from Columbus. The first mode, the initial and immediate response to an encounter with a "marvel," leaves its imprint in those moments in Columbus' writing that register "a certain excess, a hyperbolic intensity, a sense of awed delight" (Greenblatt 76); an "intense pleasure of looking" (77); or "a heightening of impressions until they reach a kind of perfection" (77). So, for example, Columbus writes in his logbook: "Here the fish are so different from ours that it is a marvel. . . . [T]he

colours are so fine that there is no man that would not marvel and take great delight in seeing them" (*Diario* 89). A few days later he refers to "flocks of parrots that obscure the sun; and birds of so many kinds and sizes, and so different from ours, that it is a marvel" (91).

The second mode occurs when Columbus deploys wonder as "a calculated rhetorical strategy" and deliberately evokes a sense of the marvellous in the service of a pre-existing epistemology or ideology (Greenblatt 73). Hence, in his letters to his patrons at the Spanish imperial court, Columbus uses the word "marvellous" frequently in relation to the operations of divine providence, for example when he asserts that God "has marvelously bestowed" the New World and all its wonders—animal, vegetable, mineral, territorial, human—on its discoverers (qtd. in Greenblatt 52). In this second mode, wonder goes hand in hand with legal and political acts of appropriation—with violence, economic exploitation, trade, invasion, seizure of territory, and enslavement. This kind of wonder functions as "the evocation of an aesthetic response in the service of a legitimation process" (Greenblatt 74), so that "[t]he claim of possession is grounded in the power of wonder" (83). Thus Columbus can deploy wonder as "an agent of conversion" (75) that "bring[s] together commodity conversion and spiritual conversion" by means of the simultaneous baptism and enslavement of native peoples (71–72). Incipient capitalism is rendered consistent with Christianity: the wonderfully gentle innocence of the natives signifies both their readiness for conversion to Christianity (since they are so Christlike already) and their availability for conversion into commodities (since they are powerless against Spanish military force). Improvement and exploitation go hand in hand, and the function of wonder is to provide a heroic and delightful but also pious veneer for this process. It thus legitimates Columbus' own actions, justifies the investment the Spanish monarchy has made in him, and promises a full return on that investment in the future.

This second form of wonder—the deployment of an initial moment of epistemological suspense in a rhetorical gesture that converts exotic territories, animals, and peoples into resources, assets, and commodities—constitutes an important mechanism throughout the emergence

of early modern colonialism and capitalism. Almost two centuries after Columbus' arrival in the Caribbean, Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) uses this device with great efficacy. Setting the scene for her story in the (former) British plantation colony of Surinam, Behn describes the state of "perfect amity" that exists between the English and the native people (6). Both this friendly relationship and Behn's representation of it are literally and rhetorically mediated via wondrous animals. She writes that the British, rather than "daring to command" the natives,

> caress 'em with all the brotherly and friendly affection in the world; trading with them for their fish, venison, buffalo's skins, and little rarities; as marmosets, a sort of monkey, as big as a rat or weasel, but of marvelous and delicate shape, having face and hands like a human creature; and cousheries, a little beast in the form and fashion of a lion, as big as a kitten, but so exactly made in all parts like that noble beast that it is it in miniature. Then for little paraketoes, great parrots, mackaws, and a thousand other birds and beasts of wonderful and surprising forms, shapes, and colors. For skins of prodigious snakes, of which there are some threescore yards in length; as is the skin of one that may be seen at his Majesty's Antiquary's; where are also some rare [butter]flies, of amazing forms and colors, presented to 'em by myself; some as big as my fist, some less; and all of various excellencies, such as art cannot imitate. Then we trade for feathers, which they order into all shapes, make themselves little short habits of 'em and glorious wreaths for their heads, necks, arms, and legs, whose tinctures are unconceivable. (6–7)[7]

"Marvelous," "wonderful," "surprising," "prodigious," "rare," "amazing," "glorious," "unconceivable": Behn seasons her description richly with the language of wonder. The animals she refers to conform in various ways to the received pattern of beastly marvels: unexpected transformations of scale (miniature lions, gigantic serpents and insects), extraordinary mixtures and metamorphoses (monkey-rat-weasel-human), and colours of an intensity that dazzles perception.

Yet at the same time this passage is pervaded by commercial and colonial impulses.[8] The "perfect amity" to which Behn alludes, presented as an Edenic state of innocence, in fact derives from political and commercial reality, in particular the colonists' desire for trade in exotic specimens: "rarities," parrots, snakeskins, and butterflies such as those that end up in the British royal cabinet of wonders ("His Majesty's Antiquary's"), along with cloaks of feathers to be used onstage in the King's Theatre, with which Behn as a dramatist and actress was well acquainted. Such exotic tastes were characteristic of the Restoration Court. Following the Puritan disposition of the interregnum, Charles II's return to the throne in 1660 signalled an efflorescence of ornate styles and fashions in all things: stylized natural designs, baroque décor, theatrical spectacles, and of course imported exotica from Africa, the East, and above all the New World. Behn stiches herself into this opulent tapestry by referring to her gift of butterfly specimens from Surinam to the newly formed Royal Society. Here, again, exotic wonder functions as a promise and an agent of conversion, this time in the field of knowledge; those "rare [butter]flies, of amazing forms and colors, . . . such as art cannot imitate" are presented as invitations to extend the grasp of European and especially British natural philosophy. As Laura Brown puts it,

> [t]he marvels here are all movable goods, readily transportable to a European setting, where they implicitly appear as exotic and desirable acquisitions. Behn's enumeration of these goods is typical of the age's economic and literary language, where the mere act of listing, the evocation of brilliant colors, and the sense of an incalculable numerousness express the period's fascination with imperialist accumulation. (52)

Behn goes on to repeat that the British colonists "live in perfect tranquillity and good understanding" with the native people of Surinam, "as it behoves us to do" since the Surinamese, "for very small and unvaluable trifles, supply us with that 'tis impossible for us to get" (9). These supplies include not only those animal "rarities" for export to Europe referred to above but also "the best food in the country," which the Surinamese can access because of their marvellous skill in hunting: "by

the mere activity of their feet [they can] run down the nimblest deer and other eatable beasts," while "in the water, one would think they were gods of the rivers, or fellow-citizens of the deep; so rare an art they have in swimming, diving, and almost living in water; by which they command the less swift inhabitants of the floods" (9). Behn deploys wondrous forms of animality not only to rhapsodise the opportunities for trade offered by the New World's nonhuman exotics but also to attest to the amenability of the native people, who are swifter on foot than European hounds and in the water than fish. Just as in Columbus' writings, the rhetoric of exotic wonder functions for Behn as an agent of conversion, setting the scene for her own narrative, which takes for granted and depends on the legitimacy of a "properly" conducted transatlantic slave trade, reinforced through contrast with the tragic consequences of enslaving the wrong class of person—that is, the African royal Prince Oroonoko and his Princess Imoinda. *Oroonoko*'s opening menagerie of wonders offers a glossy prospectus that invites further investment in plantation agriculture—the economic miracle that, through the combination of territorial appropriation, the decimation of indigenous populations, systematic enslavement, environmental destruction, and species exploitation, created the base for Britain's imperial hegemony during the eighteenth century and beyond.

II.

Meanwhile, authoritative new models for responding to new wonders emerged in the domains of philosophy and the embryonic natural sciences. Cartesian instrumentalism, which extended its influence widely during the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, offered an explicit programme for processing a potentially vertiginous capacity for wonder into epistemological certainty.

In his final work, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), René Descartes identifies wonder (*l'admiration*) as "the first of all the passions" (52). As Fisher points out, in this respect the Cartesian programme seems based on the Socratic maxim that describes wonder as "the beginning of philosophy" (41). On the other hand, Descartes designs his entire system of thought to remove from wonder its most radical possibili-

ties, resolve extravagant wonder into the discovery of mechanistically conceived causes and effects, and burn it out through the application of a corrosive rationalism. He achieves this, in the first place, by warning emphatically against the more exorbitant forms of wonder, which he associates with astonishment (étonnement), "an excess of wonder which can never be but bad" (*Passions* 58). He states that "when one wonders too much and is astonished[,] . . . this can entirely eradicate or pervert the use of reason. That is why, although it is good to be born with some kind of inclination to this passion [wonder], since it disposes us to the acquisition of the sciences, we should still try afterwards to emancipate ourselves from it as much as possible" (59–60). The second way Descartes domesticates wonder, then, is by alluding to it—albeit in a carefully disciplined form—precisely in order to effect its dissolution through reason. Descartes' best-known work, *Discourse on the Method* (1637), was published as the preface to a book that included the "Meteorology," an account of phenomena that customarily inspire wonder: meteors, thunder, rainbows. In the first paragraphs of this essay, Descartes expresses the hope "that if I here explain the nature of clouds, in such a way that we will no longer have occasion to wonder at anything that can be seen of them[,] . . . we will easily believe that it is similarly possible to find the causes of everything that is most admirable [*de plus admirable*, most wondrous] above the earth" (*Discourse* 263). The Cartesian method programmatically annihilates the possibility of a genuinely challenging sense of wonder: his reference to *l'admiration* becomes merely an invitation to the epistemological method that follows, which promptly resolves an initial supposition of wonder into correctly constituted knowledge.

Similarly, the (in)famous comparison of animals to machines in Part Five of the *Discourse* constitutes a dismissal of the possibility that any lasting wonder can attach to the operation of the senses and actions of the animal body. The hydraulic explanations that Descartes advances for means by which nerves, muscles, and animal spirits "cause the parts of the body to move in many different ways, but always thoroughly well suited either to the objects presented to its senses or to its internal impulses" are designed explicitly to leave the reader with no lingering

wonderment (45). The animal body's capacities "will not seem at all strange," he concludes, "to those who know how many various automata, or moving machines, the industry of man can make, using but a few pieces of machinery" (45).

Like European imperialism, Cartesianism transforms wonder from a potentially radical sense of newness and alterity into a mechanism for apprehending knowledge and matter with more certainty than ever and according to already-accepted structures. As Leela Gandhi puts it,

> [t]he Cartesian celebration of the human subject's epistemological possibilities is inevitably accompanied by an assertion of its power over, and freedom from, the external world of objects. This power—founded in knowledge—recognises that nature is threatening only, and insofar as, it is mysterious and incalculable. In response to this threat, the elaborations of *cogito* reduce the unintelligible diversity and material alterity of the world to the familiar contents of our minds. This opens up the possibility of ordering or taming the wild profusion of things formally, according to the structure of the subject's emancipatory rationality. (35–36)

In the century following Descartes' work, the task of formally "ordering or taming the wild profusion of things" (a phrase Gandhi borrows from Michel Foucault, as I indicate below)—particularly that profuse category of "things" who were themselves wild, such as exotic animals—fell to the increasingly self-confident practitioners of the New Science, whose methods were enabled by the conjunction between Cartesian rationalism and imperialist expansion. Mary Louise Pratt marks 1735 as an exemplary year for "the emergence of a new version of what I like to call Europe's 'planetary consciousness', a version marked by an orientation toward . . . the construction of global-scale meaning through the descriptive apparatuses of natural history" (15).[9] Pratt chooses this year because it saw the launch of two related projects: the publication of Carolus Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* and the departure of Europe's first major international scientific expedition. In the years that followed, as the system of taxonomy instigated by Linnaeus "took hold throughout Europe,"

> [h]is "disciples" (for so they called themselves) fanned out by the dozens across the globe, by sea and by foot. . . . Arrangements with the overseas trading companies, especially the Swedish East India Company, gave free passage to Linnaeus' students, who began turning up everywhere collecting plants and insects, measuring, annotating, preserving, making drawings, and trying desperately to get it all home intact. (Pratt 25)

For Linnaeus (and Linnaeans), as for Descartes (and Cartesians), wonder fulfils an important function—or at least, the rhetoric of wonder does: a famous quotation from the taxonomist's *Philosophia Botanica*, "*erit mirari omnia, etiam tritissima*" ("find wonder in all things, even the most commonplace") (Linnaeus 297) has sometimes been described as Linnaeus' motto. Yet once again, this apparently primary passion becomes ineluctably disciplined and domesticated—this time, by the severe regulatory principles of Linnaean taxonomy: consistency of comparison, logical and rational order, and secure and stable borders between and relationships amongst elements.[10]

This becomes clear if we contrast the Linnaean approach with a putative taxonomy that subverts such disciplinarity—just as Foucault does in the preface to his archaeology of modern scientific epistemology, *The Order of Things*. "This book first arose out of a passage in [Jorge Luis] Borges," writes Foucault,

> out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes "a certain Chinese encyclopaedia" in which it is written that "animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine

> camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies". In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that. (Foucault xv; emphasis in original)[11]

In calling Borges' list a "taxonomy" and identifying his own response to it as one of "wonderment," Foucault recognises how this brief hoax quotation restores to the written representation of animals the effect of wonder at its most vertiginous—the very thing excluded by Cartesian geometry and Linnaean classification alike. What makes Borges' animals exotically wondrous is not their imagined bodies or species, to which he scarcely alludes, but rather the incommensurability of the classificatory system as a whole.[12] Since each category implies principles of selection incompatible with all the others (and one, category h, includes all the others, while another, l, includes everything *not* included), the reader is left in a giddy state of epistemological suspension—an "aporetic vertigo" (Rubenstein 7)—wondering what kind of zoological-cultural world could produce such a system. This wild form of wonder, as Foucault notes, cannot be domesticated but instead turns back to challenge the reader's own epistemological certainties.

III.

And so, via Borges' characteristically concise and elegant yet feral taxonomy, I turn to the Latin American tradition of magic realism and its deployment of wondrous exoticism. I return to García Márquez and his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, which summoned, for his Northern European audience, marvellous animals as a means to embody the zoological, historical, environmental, cultural, and epistemological otherness of South America. As I discuss above, García Márquez did so by citing one of the first European accounts of the continent's fauna: that of Pigafetta. But after 460 years of extensive traffic between Europe and the Americas, the wonder of Pigafetta's hogs with

navels in their haunches, spoon-beaked birds, and mule-camel-deer-horse hybrids no longer functions as it would have in the sixteenth century. For one thing, as García Márquez must have been shrewdly aware, although these creatures probably remained mysterious to most of his European audience in Stockholm in 1982, his own compatriots and most South Americans would have had little trouble identifying the real animals who prompted those descriptions in the first place. The hogs with navels on their haunches are doubtless peccaries or *javelinas* (*Pecari tajacu*), pig-like animals that have visible scent glands above their tails which could easily be mistaken for navels at first sight (Burnie 233). The roseate spoonbill (*Platalea ajaja*) is an ibis-like bird native to various parts of the South American continent; mesmerised by the rounded spatulate tip to its long beak, Pigafetta seems to have omitted this bird's other most striking feature, a plumage ranging in colour from pale pink to deep magenta, depending on diet (Forshaw 162–63). Finally, the hybrid beast that Pigafetta's description assembles, according to exoticist best practice, out of anatomical parts from four separate but familiar species, is clearly a guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*) (Burnie 237).

In his interviews García Márquez shows a keen awareness of the differences between how the wonders evoked in his writing might register globally—in which context he was most often classified as a "magic realist"—and how they related to the context from which they derived: the everyday life and storytelling traditions of his native Colombia. Often he insists that the most notoriously magical moments in his fictions come from reality. The cloud of yellow butterflies that accompanies Mauricio Babilonia in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he tells interviewer Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, originated in his childhood memory of an electrician who several times visited his family home, each time accompanied by a yellow butterfly (García Márquez, *Fragrance* 36). But he also locates the source of his marvels in an "ability to see reality in a particular way" (51) that he considers endemic to the Caribbean coast of Colombia, deriving as it does from that location's unique mingling of cultural traditions—"[t]he exuberant imagination of African slaves, mixed with that of the pre-Columbian natives and added to the Andalusian taste for fantasy

and the Galician cult of the supernatural [brought to the region by Spanish colonists]" (51).

For García Márquez, the specific form of wonder he seeks to evoke in his writing has both a very specific local point of origin and a very definite political project, which I would describe as epistemological decolonization: the process of creating a form of representation appropriate to the reality of Latin America, and therefore resistant to what he perceives as the imperialist hegemony of European rationalism. "The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own," he states towards the end of his Nobel lecture, "serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary" ("Nobel Lecture"). In *Tales Beyond Solitude*, a British TV documentary made in 1989, García Márquez identifies more precisely the epistemological "patterns not our own" he has in mind: "The moment you have," he says and then pauses for a moment before finding the exact term, "a *Cartesianism*, a rigour of thought that doesn't allow the imagination to fly, there's bound to be lots of things people miss" (Stevens et al.; emphasis in original). And in his interviews with Mendoza he suggests that European readers tend to recognise the magic in his stories but miss their realism "because their rationalism prevents them seeing . . . that reality is full of the most extraordinary things" (*Fragrance* 33). He gives the example of an incident in the far south of Argentina, in which "winds from the South Pole swept a whole circus away and the next day fishermen caught the bodies of lions and giraffes in their nets" (36). For García Márquez, the evocation of wonder constitutes a necessary challenge to the authority of the systems of perception, knowledge, and representation associated with the European Enlightenment: rationalism, Cartesianism, positivism, realism—the same systems of ordered surfaces and planes that Foucault finds challenged by Borges' "Chinese Encyclopaedia."

The fiction of García Márquez and other magic realists represents an alternative attitude towards wonder from that of Cartesian rationalism: a determination not to be rid of it but to nourish and dwell on it. Yet the result is not the stupid, blind bemusement, the paralysis of thought by excessive astonishment, that Descartes feared. Rather, García Márquez deploys the wondrous as a critical tool to prise open a space between European,

Cartesian, rationalist, positivist realism and the grounded reality it seeks to cover so completely that we too often take the two to be identical and so fail to see what might be thriving in the space between them.

In the short story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," for example, García Márquez represents the titular figure of wonder in a way that challenges one of the fundamental boundaries of the Cartesian rationalist tradition, which is also one of its increasingly discredited limits: the sharp distinction between humans and other animals. Like Pigafetta's logbook and the wondrous encyclopedia faked up by Borges, "A Very Old Man" achieves an exotic wonder through the evocation of incongruous connections between very closely observed, ordinary animal realities. Specifically, the old man of the title is rendered wondrous not so much by the wings that grow from his back, which could make him merely a figure of religious fantasy, an angel or devil, but by means of a pervasive comparison between those wings and those of much more familiar feathered animals—to be precise, buzzards and chickens. When Pelayo and Elisenda, the story's protagonists, find the old man lying in their courtyard during a tropical storm, his "huge buzzard wings, dirty and half-plucked, were forever entangled in the mud" (García Márquez, "A Very Old Man" 105–06). Far from lapsing into stunned amazement, Pelayo and Elisenda "looked at him so long and so closely that [they] very soon overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar" (106). It is the everyday materiality of the wondrous element and the observers' unwavering commitment to encountering it face on that creates the kind of wonder characteristic of magic realism. Following the logic of their conclusions, Elisenda and Pelayo house their avian visitor in the chicken coop, where he sits "like a huge decrepit hen among the fascinated chickens" (107). Gregory Rabassa uses "fascinated" to translate *absortas*, which could equally be rendered by "engrossed" or "rapt"—adjectives that convey with realistic precision the intent concentration with which chickens attend to insects. Yet even the chickens' rapture blends familiarity with the prodigious, since it derives from the "stellar parasites" that infest the old man's feathers (108).

This technique involves a skilful juxtaposition of the wondrous element with a familiar material reality in such a way that "the magic seems

to grow almost imperceptibly out of the real, giving us, as [Salman] Rushdie puts it, a dense 'commingling of the improbable and the mundane'" (Faris 174). By melding the techniques of realism (accumulation of metonymic detail) into the narration of the miraculous, instead of using the metaphorical or symbolic modes normally associated with the fantastic (as in allegory), writers like García Márquez subvert the authority of realist fiction, as well as the epistemological master narratives that other characters in the fictions attempt to impose. The town doctor in "A Very Old Man," the representative of Cartesian science, finds that "what surprised him most" about the old man "was the logic of his wings. They seemed so natural on that completely human organism that he couldn't understand why other men didn't have them too" (García Márquez, "A Very Old Man" 111). This reaction reconfigures not only that most Cartesian of oppositions, the distinction between human and animal, but also the very concept of the natural. At the end of the story, the old man flies away, freed by something entirely familiar and natural—entirely chicken-like, in fact: a moult followed by fresh plumage. And yet the wonder remains unresolved; we never find out who or what he was. Instead, what we thought we knew about angels, medical science, miracles, and chickens now seems slightly less certain than before. García Márquez thus propounds and exemplifies a literary project designed to move in the opposite direction from Cartesian thought: not to surpass wonder, nor to be rid of it, but to keep it alive and encourage its proliferating metamorphoses.

IV.

Of course, not all literature influenced by the magic realist intervention shares the project so clearly enunciated by García Márquez. Yann Martel's popular novel *Life of Pi* produces quite different results from its vivid and energetic juxtaposition of exotic wonders and Cartesian rationalism. Heavily influenced by both the magic realist and the exotic literary traditions, Martel's novel depends for its appeal largely on the generation of wonder, which it achieves primarily by the evocation of a striking central tableau: an Indian boy and Bengal tiger, adrift together on a lifeboat in the Pacific. Here, again, the effect of astonishment de-

rives from the conjunction of mismatched items in a highly improbable, if not impossible, taxonomy: as Pi tells the incredulous shipping investigators who have trouble crediting his story, "[t]igers exist, lifeboats exist, oceans exist. Because the three have never come together in your limited, narrow experience, you refuse to believe that they might" (Martel 299). The first part of the novel creates a more or less plausible backstory designed to arrive at the incongruous scenario: Pi grows up in a zoo owned by his family in Pondicherry; the family decides to migrate to Canada; the ship transporting them and the zoo animals sinks; the only survivors are Pi and a tiger named (again incongruously) Richard Parker.

The primary emotional turning point comes not when the ship sinks, nor when the lifeboat reaches shore, nor when Pi offers a second and very different account of his survival. Rather it comes when, face to face with the tiger in the tiny space of the lifeboat, Pi realises how he will survive:

> It is the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness. He was looking at me intently. . . .
>
> He made a sound, a snort from his nostrils. I pricked up my ears. He did it a second time. I was astonished. *Prusten*?
>
> Tigers make a variety of sounds. They include a number of roars and growls, the loudest of these being most likely the full-throated *aaonh*. . . . I had heard all these sounds growing up. Except for prusten. If I knew of it, it was because Father had told me about it. He had read descriptions of it in the literature. . . . Prusten is the quietest of tiger calls, a puff through the nose to express friendliness and harmless intentions.
>
> Richard Parker did it again, this time with a rolling of the head. He looked exactly as if he were asking me a question.
>
> I looked at him, full of fearful wonder. There being no immediate threat, my breath slowed down, my heart stopped knocking about in my chest, and I began to regain my senses.
>
> I had to tame him. It was at that moment I realized this necessity. (163–64; emphasis in original)

This pivotal moment in the novel comprises nothing other than the conversion of Pi's "fearful wonder," his "astonished" relation to the tiger, into an instrumentalist relation based on dominance. In the ensuing chapters Pi succeeds in dominating Richard Parker through a combination of techniques derived from animal behaviourism, zoo-animal wrangling, and circus training. His most effective application of these principles involves programming the tiger to associate the blowing of a whistle with sea-sickness, induced by Pi's rocking of the boat from side to side. Pi succeeds because, as the son of a zoo-keeper, he possesses a thorough knowledge of the reduced, stagnant, and decontexualised animality of captive exotic animals: he inherits a discourse developed through the observation of zoo inmates by behaviourists such as Heini Hediger, whose words Pi actually quotes at one point as those of a "wise animal man . . . well versed in the ways of animals" (44).[13] It would be difficult to find a narrative that more clearly conforms to the Cartesian tradition discussed above: the conversion of wonder to mechanistic cause and effect through rationalism and the (re-) establishment between humans and nonhuman animals of an impermeable boundary founded on the former's possession of a rationalising mind capable of manipulating the solely mechanistic materiality of the latter.

Occurring as it does in a novel whose marketing relied so much on an appeal to the narrative tradition of the wondrous, this falling-back into Cartesian instrumentalism is symptomatic. It suggests that the commitment to recognising and maintaining a genuinely unsettling sense of wonderment will always, or at least in our thoroughly instrumentalist cultures, be vulnerable to capture by authoritarian epistemologies. The work of García Márquez and others, however, reassures us that such wonderment nevertheless remains possible, while suggesting that it might depend on the presence and meeting of certain crucial factors: particular representational techniques, styles, and dispositions; sensitivity to the dialectic between local significance and the decontextualizing effects of a commodifying, globalizing planetary consciousness; and a staunch suspicion of the totalising ideologies of our time. The contemporary proliferation of fantastic narratives—literary, cinematic, and tele-

visual—suggests that a finely tuned reading of wonder has considerable relevance right now.[14]

For Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "wonder is only wonder when it remains open" (10); for Fisher, "the experience of wonder continually reminds us that our grasp of the world is incomplete" (24). So it is, perhaps, that all enduring evocations of wonder contain something stubborn, something that escapes, something unassimilable. In Pigafetta's list, for example, although it has become easy enough to recognise the hogs with navels on their backsides, the spoon-billed wading birds, and the mule-camel-deer-horse mongrel, one species he mentions—those legless birds who lay their eggs on the backs of their mates—remains forever beyond our grasp.[15]

Notes

1 García Márquez' paraphrase of Pigafetta is faithful except on two points: first, the latter does not compare the tongueless spoon-billed birds to pelicans: he simply calls them *uccelli grandi*, or "large birds" (39); second, Pigafetta refers to the "tail" rather than the "whinny" of a horse (42–43).

2 In *Strange Wonder*, Rubenstein thinks along similar lines when she identifies this form of wonder operating in the earliest origins of Western philosophy: discussing Socrates' famous suggestion that philosophy itself begins in wondering (*thaumazein*), Rubenstein writes that "[w]onder . . . comes on the scene neither as a tranquilizing force nor as a kind of will-toward-epistemological domination, but rather as a profoundly unsettling pathos" (4).

3 There are a number of excellent recent discussions of wonder. Rubenstein provides a thoughtful discussion of wonder in twentieth-century philosophy. Vasalou's *Wonder* explores the relationship between the wondrous and several other related categories of experience (the delightful, the sudden, the extraordinary). Willmott's *Reading for Wonder* provides a highly perceptive account of the implications of wonder for literary studies: his account of the potential of wonder to induce states of empathy, inform ethics, and expand ecological sensibilities is especially astute and relevant to my argument here (37–63).

4 Each of the bestiary details cited in this paragraph is drawn from the *Physiologus*: see respectively Curley 42–45, 4–5, 45–46.

5 According to Daston and Park, however, the bestiarists' religious aims are served not only by their theological exegeses of different animal species but by the evocation of wonder itself, in which respect they follow Saint Augustine's injunction to Christians to perceive "the created world as a spectacle of wonders, engineered for human pleasure and delight" (Daston and Park 45).

6 For the line of authorities who refer to the phoenix, see Barber 141–43; Curley 13–14; and Nigg 19, 55–56, 63–64, 77–78, 97.

7 Behn's "cousheries" is probably the lion tamarin (*Leontopithecus*): Acheson points out that in Warren's *Impartial Description of Surinam* he writes of "the *Cusharee*," which he describes as "less than a Marmazet, and shap'd every way perfectly like a Lyon" (qtd. in Acheson 127; emphasis in original).

8 For excellent analyses along these lines see Rivero and Park.

9 1735 was also the year in which William Harrison tried out his first "sea clock," a prototype marine chronometer that solved the ancient problem of measuring longitude, thereby granting Britain, and eventually all European nations, an even more forceful grip on global navigation (Sobel 93–101).

10 For a discussion of what Rubenstein calls the Enlightenment's "philosophical attempt to neutralize wonder by comprehending every object that might provoke it" (14–15), see Daston and Park.

11 The Borges passage cited by Foucault, albeit in a more recent translation into English, can be found in Borges, p. 231.

12 Borges' fragment exemplifies perfectly what Willmott calls (in relation to *Alice in Wonderland*) "presumptive synecdoche" (65): a technique for evoking wonder by means of the "implication of hidden systems or worlds of life by the representation of curious fragments of it" (137).

13 Although this view of animals is ascribed to Pi rather than explicitly voiced by the narrator, the impact of the novel and its project of reconciling reason and imaginative wonder both depend on the reader's acceptance of this view. The success of the novel's central and most wondrous scenario—that of the boy who survives nine months adrift in the Pacific with a living tiger—requires the reader to accede to Pi's earlier justification of animals' captivity in zoos, which is based on a specifically behaviourist account of "animals' minds" (Martel 16–17). I have discussed this aspect of the novel in *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (Armstrong 176–79). See also Schwalm's work on Martel's alignment of his own views about animals and zoos with those he ascribes to Pi.

14 In this context, see also Willmott's astute conclusions about the relationship between wonder, mass media, commercialism, and consumerism (209–17).

15 Skelton identifies these birds as storm petrels (*Hydrobatidae*) (qtd. in Pigafetta 35n1). But of course storm petrels do not incubate their eggs the way Pigafetta describes: no known bird does. Moreover, no one who has seen storm petrels would say (as Pigafetta does) that they "have no feet and are always in the sea" (35): on the contrary, the most recognisable behaviour of the petrel is its habit of hovering just above the water, paddling its feet on the surface to attract fish—hence the name *Hydrobatidae*, from the ancient Greek, meaning "water walker."

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