THE METAMORPHOSES OF THE QUASI-OBJECT: NARRATIVE, NETWORK, AND SYSTEM IN BRUNO LATOUR AND *THE ISLAND OF DR. MOREAU*

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ABSTRACT

This paper will shuttle between literature and science studies by reading narratives of bodily transformation through Bruno Latour's philosophy of modernity, and by reading Latour's sociological writings through literary and narrative appropriations of recent systems theories. After discussing this convergence of narrative theory, science studies, and systems theory, I will address H.G. Wells's novella *The Island of Doctor Moreau* some neocybernetic questions about ontology and subjectivity in a post-Darwinian world.

KEY WORDS: Narrative, metamorphosis, network, system, neocybernetics.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo conecta la literatura y la ciencia mediante una lectura de narraciones sobre transformaciones corpóreas a la luz de la filosofía de modernidad propuesta por Bruno Latour y, al mismo tiempo, mediante una lectura de los textos sociológicos de Latour a la luz de las dimensiones narrativas y literarias de recientes teorías neo-cibernéticas de sistemas. Tras explicar esta convergencia de la teoría narrativa, los estudios de ciencia y la teoría de sistemas, investigaré la novela de H.G. Wells *La isla del Doctor Moreau* para plantear algunas cuestiones neo-cibernéticas sobre la ontología y la subjetividad en un mundo post-darwiniano.

PALABRAS CLAVE: narrativa, metamorfosis, red, sistemas, neo-cibernética.

> We shall at least be freed from the vain search for the undiscovered and undiscoverable essence of the term species.
> Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species* (1859)
>
> What on earth was he —man or animal?
> H.G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896)

The theory of evolution marks a recent moment in the long history of narratives of bodily metamorphosis, a modern moment when scientific discourse presented new and persuasive explanations for divergences in the forms of living

beings. Darwinisms of many stripes quickly subsumed more traditional ways of accounting for magical or uncanny changes of species, while conversely, evolution gave scientific legs to a body of fantastic tales that had always implied a greater fluidity of natural embodiment than allowed for in Western philosophies of biological as well as metaphysical essences. Technological developments since then, such as television and space travel —magical indeed by traditional standards— added machines to the ranks of "evolutionary" entities. Around mid-twentieth century the discourse of cybernetics emerged to explore the increasingly complex interfaces of technological and biological systems. In recent decades cybernetics has developed into "second-order" systems theories, a neocybernetics focused on the formal conditions and structural couplings of systemic multiplicities.[1]

Working from comparable positions put forward by philosopher of science Michel Serres, sociologist of science and technology Bruno Latour's works are also neocybernetic in main inspiration. This paper will link literature and science studies by reading H.G. Wells's novella *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, a protocybernetic narrative of bodily transformation, through Bruno Latour's philosophy of modernity, and by reading Latour's sociological writings through literary and narrative appropriations of recent systems theories. Out of this convergence of narrative, science studies, and systems theory will emerge some neocybernetic questions about ontology and subjectivity in a post-Darwinian world.[2]

While initially focused on "actor-network" theories of fact construction in technoscientific collectives (Latour and Woolgar; Latour, *Science*), Latour's later sociological methods coalesced around a conceptual figure derived from Michel Serres (see Serres, *Genesis* 87-91 and passim). Latour constructs and observes the intermingled operations of natural and cultural formations in scientific research and technological projects by following the circulation of "quasi-objects."[3] The

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[1] Key names in this field besides Serres and Latour are Heinz von Foerster, Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, and Niklas Luhmann. Maturana and Varela developed the concept of *autopoiesis* in relation to the operational autonomies of biological systems. Luhmann's extension of autopoiesis to psychic and social systems has enabled significant literary purchase on neocybernetic systems theory: see Roberts; de Berg; and Clarke, "Paradox." Luhmann's central statement is *Social Systems*. Important treatments of literature and neocybernetics are Paulson and Hayles. Quasi-objects are factored into feminist science studies in Haraway and Squier.

[2] While Latour's work has been taken up extensively in critical and theoretical discussion across the humanities and social sciences, he has received less notice in literary criticism. Notable exceptions are literature and science scholars Crawford (see "Imaging" and "Networking") and Squier (see "Omega"). On Latour's influence on interdisciplinary science studies in the humanities, see the discussions of *inscription* in Clarke and Henderson. For more on Latour in relation to systems theory, see Clarke, "Strong Constructivism."

[3] The quasi-object often emerges in Latour's text in the two-sided form "quasi-objects, quasi-subjects." He introduces "these strange new hybrids [...] what, following Michel Serres (1987), I shall call quasi-objects, quasi-subjects" (*Modern* 51). For more on this collaboration, see Serres with Latour, *Conversations*; Wesling; and Clarke, "Science."

quasi-object names the objecthood of subjects (such as human persons) and the subjecthood of objects (such as machines and nonhuman organisms). My basic thesis follows this link: The stories Latour tells about sociotechnological quasi-objects present a range of transformative interactions that rhyme conceptually with narrative fictions of metamorphic changes, say, Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Keats's *Lamia*, García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy. The metamorphic characters in these stories are, so to speak, *fictive* quasi-objects —manifest hybrids, usually of human and nonhuman components, brought about by various magical or daemonic technologies, beginning with language and narration per se. This already suggests something anachronistic about quasi-objects —they capture or rejoin a perennial idiom of narrative mythopoesis.

The Island of Dr. Moreau is a modern story in this perennial metamorphic vein. It is particularly interesting as an allegory of modernity because its metamorphs are "evolved" rather than debased —anthropomorphized animals rather than animalized humans. A reluctant witness of Dr. Moreau's covert operations, the uninvited castaway Prendick at first mistakes the ontological status of Moreau's Beast People for the latter. The climactic revelation that animals *are* humanizable, by humans themselves, despite whatever cruelty is involved, strikes him as confirming a darkly metaphysical interpretation of the theory of evolution: that without a stable demarcation between the human and the animal, the human will not stay human but "lapse" into bestiality, and that that boundary has already been breached. The final words of his written narration moralize this melancholy apocalypse:

> There is, though I do not know how there is or why there is, a sense of infinite peace and protection in the glittering hosts of heaven. There it must be, I think, in the vast and eternal laws of matter, and not in the daily cares and sins and troubles of men, that whatever is more than animal within us must find its solace and its hope. I hope, or I could not live. And so, in hope and solitude, my story ends. (Wells 104).[4]

Latour's writings suggest instead that, as literary metamorphs with the specific shape of technoscientific quasi-objects, the Beast People have something important to say about how human, natural, and technological systems actually function and interact, something to say about worldly sociality that Prendick cannot see. In regard to quasi-objects, as we will see later, Latour speaks about *(x)-morphism* —the *x* factor being the play of indifference between "subjects" and "objects" when it comes to the construction of sociotechnological networks such as scientific laboratories, engineering projects, and the human and natural communities that now depend on them. Through the observation of quasi-objects, one recovers not a

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[4] Squier reads *Moreau* along with comparable biological fantasies in "Interspecies Reproduction." On Darwinian issues, see Krumm. See also Gold.

human/nonhuman stand-off but a "variable-ontology world [...] the result of the interdefinition of the actors" (Latour, *Aramis* 173). Latour's highly mobile concepts describe a neocybernetic vision of the necessary hybridity of symbiotic networks and system/environment couplings, and they describe equally well the daemonic landscapes of metamorphic narratives.

1. METAMORPHOSIS
AS AN ALLEGORY OF NARRATIVE

Like the vicissitudes of persons in love or conflict, the vicissitudes of bodies are cornerstones of narratives. Body changes may play out as the representation of familiar corporeal experiences —as aging, as the renovations of puberty or pregnancy, or as the result of the mundane violence of other persons, physical forces, living processes, or cultural models, for instance, as injury, illness, or body-deforming constrictions of labor or social role. But in mythic and fantastic narratives, bodily metamorphoses take paradoxical turns and play out as impossible or contradictory physical changes.

In "Cybernetics and Ghosts," Italo Calvino refers such fantastic events, all the mayhem of mythic or magical transformations, to a mode of self-reference inherent in the transmission of stories —the storyteller's primal focus on language itself, the narrator's capacity for countless constructions and recombinations among the elements of the media of narration. In the construction and oral transmission of fables and myths, the

> immobile world that surrounded tribal man, strewn with signs of the fleeting correspondences between words and things, came to life in the voice of the storyteller, spun out into the flow of a spoken narrative within which each word acquired new values and transmitted them to the ideas and images they defined. Every animal, every object, every relationship took on beneficial or malign powers that came to be called magical powers but should, rather, have been called narrative powers, potentialities contained in the word, in its ability to link itself to other words on the plane of discourse. (Calvino 5)

Magical or daemonic events "on the plane of discourse," then, are both cause and effect of the capacity of language in social circulation to sound out and link up its own structures. The narrative depiction of fantastic bodily metamorphoses sets into further play the formal possibilities of linguistic and conceptual combinations. Moreover, the narrative drive toward images of bodily transformation tests and contests the boundaries of "identities" and their psychic and social regimes. Transformation stories are a kind of social systemic program tool for tweaking the cultural hard drive. But what is the "spirit" or "daemon" that calls forth these aberrant figurations? Of their evolution, the transformation of metamorphoses from ancient to modern, theological to phenomenological frames of reference, Luhmann might ask: "What is 'Spirit' if not a metaphorical circumlocution for the mystery of communication?" (*Art* 10).

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As I have written elsewhere, the shapes of literary metamorphoses (that is, post-mythic and post-oral transformation stories), may be read as allegories of writing (*Allegories*). Literary metamorphoses inscribe fictional bodies with the forms of writing: for instance, the erasure of the prior body through its translation into foreign signifiers. I would extend that reading now by being explicit about the *self-reference* of narrative texts as complex reflexive elements in the operation of social systems. As oral allegories of spoken tales, inscripted allegories of writing, or cinematic allegories of cinema, the turns of metamorphic stories in any medium are also *narratives of narrative* —self-referential structures that unfold by extending verbal or visual metaphors of extended metaphor (metamorphic agents as allegorical structures) on the productive axis of narrative duration and succession. That these fantastic narrative events happen at all I take as a systemic response to communicative demands crucial to the self-maintenance of social groups. Metamorphic stories are especially good at the processing of paradox.[5] And according to second-order cybernetics, paradox is the epistemological non-foundation on which systems stand or fall.

2. LATOUR AND METAMORPHOSIS

I invoke these matters of literary transformation and bodily metamorphosis to set up a narrative systems approach to Bruno Latour's major theoretical statement, *We Have Never Been Modern*, and his literary experiment/sociological study *Aramis, or the Love of Technology.* These works present extended methodological reflections on the sociology and anthropology of technoscience and also a wealth of expository information. But the fictive and nonfictive anecdotes and stories Latour tells in those texts also present transformative actors and interactions —derived from actual scientific and technological practices— that parallel the daemonic agents and subjects of literary and narrative metamorphoses. For Latour, in scientific objects and technological projects, the operations of natural and cultural formations are necessarily intermingled, occupying neither a nature outside of society nor a society outside of nature. To observe the real intermingling of the natural and social, Latour follows the circulation of quasi-objects, as we have noted, entities with indeterminate or multiple references to categories of subject and object. While Latour's quasi-objects are discursive formations constructed from the observation of technoscientific practices, they also join the ranks of literary metamorphs and other fictive actors of transformative fantasies in significantly problematizing distinctions between subjects and objects. The textual agencies of metamorphic narra-

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[5] Neocybernetics has developed a significant literature on the role of paradox in the operation of meaning systems (psychic and social systems) in particular, and observing systems (autopoietic systems) in general. For bearings, see Luhmann, "Paradox." For wider perspectives on systems theory, see Luhmann, *Art*; Rasch & Wolfe; and Wolfe, "Systems Theory."

tives share the formal, if not the ontological, problematics of Latour's quasi-objects and -subjects, which are also directly referential, or at least, something more or other than strictly fictive. On the flipside, Latour's quasi-objects validate the efficacy of fictive metamorphs in symbolically capturing a form —the two-sided (system/environment) form— of systems operations.

But the reality of Latour's quasi-objects also has to do with their local and historical specificity: whatever self-determination the separate elements of an operating worldly network can have can only be a function of particular circumstances and material interdependencies of that network. Thus, for instance, in *Aramis*, Latour's proxy, the sociological mentor Norbert declares that he seeks a "'refined sociology which applies to a single case, to Aramis and only Aramis. I'm not looking for anything else. A single explanation, for a single, unique case; then we'll trash it" (131). Both through the Norbert persona and in his own discursive person, Latour's professed resistance to sociological metalanguage is an important methodological constraint of his network theory. But the narratives energized by this resistance can also be observed through the metalanguage of systems theory, just as the concept of the quasi-object as Latour deploys it can be usefully generalized to the fictive and fantastic constructions of narrative actors. Putting networks and systems together will help us interrogate the real interrelations of narrative and knowledge.

The metamorphic dynamics of Latourian networks occupy at least three interconnected registers: translation; mediation; and the "redistribution of the human." In his earlier work *Science in Action*, the sense of "translation" is embedded in the sociological analysis of technoscience, the construction of facts by mobilizing the flow of material and mediatic inscriptions from the bench to the textbook. Science in action demands the "translation of interests" by which diverse human and nonhuman constituencies are allied into operational networks. For Latour this "translation model" of science as complexly negotiated material fact-construction is set forward against the "diffusion model," a "mentalist" scenario and popular "fairy tale" in which solitary scientific geniuses from Galileo to Einstein come forward as prophets set apart from society, establishing facts of nature solely by turning their visionary powers on key scientific ideas (Latour, *Science* 132-34). In this disembodied mode of narrating science, the "scientistics" (so to speak, the fundamentalists of scientific revelation) purvey an idealist vision of Science as a progressive knowledge "diffusing" of its own accord —radiating like a star and moving inexorably forward toward truth, impeded only by the resistance of cultural reactionaries and other bogeypersons, such as Bruno Latour.[6] Latour's quasi-objects

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[6] The defensiveness and injustice dispensed to Latour by the "science warriors" who set forth a decade ago to sound the alarm about "postmodern anti-science" get an adequate and amusing journalistic account in Berreby. Kukla offers a more balanced critique. Latour's *Pandora's Hope* is a concerted rebuttal to those critics; see especially chapters 7 and 8 (216-65). See also Latour's self-critique in "The Promises of Constructivism."

inhabit metamorphic narratives intended to disrupt this pervasive mode of scientistic mystification.

In *We Have Never Been Modern* Latour inflects his demystifications of the diffusion model toward an argument about modernity, and expands the sense of *translation* from the construction of facts to the construction of quasi-objects, as that is enabled by the "modern Constitution." The agents and subjects of techno-logical networks are nonhumans as well as humans, which then may both be termed, if circumstances warrant, hybrids, quasi-objects, or quasi-subjects. Latour folds self-reference into his discourse at the outset: the science studies researcher, too, has been transformed by the quasi-object of research: "Hybrids ourselves […] we have chosen to follow the[se] imbroglios wherever they take us" (*Modern* 3). Latour comes to see this more refined, ontological as well as procedural, mode of transla-tion as one of two poles of *modern* practices:

> The hypothesis of this essay is that the word 'modern' designates two sets of entirely different practices which must remain distinct if they are to remain effective, but have recently begun to be confused. The first set of practices, by 'translation,' cre-ates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by 'purification,' creates entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other. (*Modern* 10-11)

Latour constructs modernity as an episteme bifurcated by the terms of an unstated modern Constitution under which courses of purification and separation hold the foreground and render the operations of hybridity unobservable, allowing "monsters," quasi-objects and -subjects, to proliferate out of sight. The link "be-tween the work of translation or mediation and that of purification […] is that the second has made the first possible: the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes —such is the paradox of the moderns" (Latour, *Modern* 12). Maintained by the repressed mediations of absentee progenitors, hybrids proliferate all the more avidly for that lack of chaper-oning. Latour thus inscribes modern subjects and objects with paradoxical identity formations, then advances "nonmodernity" as the surpassing of that paradox. In classical psychoanalytic terms, he offers a talking cure for the Modern neurosis, an overcoming of modernity's repression of its own technoscientific contingencies.

3. MEDIATION, MYTH, AND POSTMODERNITY

As we have already seen in passages just cited, in the 1990s Latour reframes the transformative dynamics of professional and procedural *translations* with crea-tive and critical *mediations*. "Mediation" in this sense operates on the "middle ground" repressed or occulted by the regimes of Modern purifications bent on setting apart the human from the nonhuman. Nevertheless, "Everything happens in the middle, everything passes between the two, everything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place.

It is the unthinkable, the unconscious of the moderns" (Latour, *Modern* 37). Quasi-objects concretize and actualize the formal mediations that hold nature and society together —mediations that were first observed in the form of semiotic phenomena from which material references had been detached. Latour lauds linguistic structuralism and its progeny of postmodern philosophies for taking as their object this middle ground between the Modern divisions of nonhuman nature from human society: "The object of all these philosophies is to make discourse not a transparent intermediary that would put the human subject in contact with the natural world, but a mediator independent of nature and society alike" (*Modern* 62).

Linguistic structuralism and poststructuralism showed that semiotic mediators are not docile couriers of meaning but upstart agents with their own agendas. In Latour's later idiom the "intermediary" —a passive delegate of the "diffusion" of knowledge, a supposedly reliable messenger— is distinguished from the "mediator," which always deviates to some degree on its way from source to destination, reworking the given script, the message sent, to translate between and thus connect otherwise uncoupled realms.[7]

> The greatness of these philosophies was that they developed, protected from the dual tyranny of referents and speaking subjects, the concepts that give the mediators their dignity —mediators that are no longer simple intermediaries or simple vehicles conveying meaning from Nature to Speakers, or vice versa. (*Modern* 63)

But semiotic mediation is neither as transparent nor as opaque as Modern purifiers, semioticians included, would like to think. For Latour, the recently-observed significance of semiotic mediation does not discount the real contingencies of the realms being mediated. Postmodern philosophies of language secured their middle ground only by bracketing out the functions of linguistic reference. Their liberation of the "median space between natures and societies so as to accommodate quasi-objects, quasi-subjects" (Latour, *Modern* 64) came at a price no longer worth paying: the detachment of linguistic reference from the rest of the world. It is a myth to think, as both the idealists and the materialists seem to do, that there can be elements without mediations. But it is equally inadequate for simplistic deconstructors to think that there can be mediations without elements mediated. Or again, the closure of linguistic reference does not prevent its operational coupling to natural and social systems; without that coupling, language would have nothing to do.

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[7] "An intermediary —although recognized as necessary— simply transports, transfers, transmits energy from one of the poles of the Constitution. It is void in itself and can only be less faithful or more or less opaque. A mediator, however, is an original event and creates what it translates as well as the entities between which it plays the mediating role" (Latour, *Modern* 77-78). Readers of Serres will also recognize here the *parasite*, Serres's figure for the transformative agencies of noise within transmissions and for the observer who can add signal and noise together. Most accessible are Serres, "Platonic Dialogue" (*Hermes* 65-70) and "The Origin of Language: Biology, Information Theory, and Thermodynamics" (*Hermes* 71-83).

Just these ambivalences of translational mediation pointed out by Latour —unstable distinctions of social agency between primary and secondary, major and minor, active and passive delegation, the mediator and the intermediary— also typically structure the literature of metamorphic changes, and more generally, the discourse of the *daemonic*.[8] In classical theological and philosophical mythopoesis, transformative dynamics are a prerogative of the divine parent, but more so, an assertion of the daemonic child. One celebrated avatar of the classical daemonic is the figure of Eros, as Plato's Diotima presents it to Socrates in the *Symposium*. Eros comes forward in that dialogue as the proper intermediary carrying messages to and from the human and the divine. The "mediator" as unreliable messenger is familiar in the classical figure of Hermes, son of Zeus and his sometime herald, who typically ditches his given assignments in favor of amorous escapades, a circumstance brilliantly recaptured for modern readers in John Keats's narrative of daemonic metamorphosis, *Lamia*. But in Apuleius's telling of the story of Cupid and Psyche, a long tale embedded within the larger metamorphic farce of *The Golden Ass*, Eros/Cupid as well is dramatized as Venus's insubordinate son. In more recent literatures, this ambivalence in daemonic mediation often follows the separatisms of Judeo-Christian theology and, preparatory to the course of Modern purifications, is parceled out into uncommunicating spheres of the angelic and the demonic.

Latour's "intermediaries" and "mediators," then, reveal their mythopoetic vocation as varieties of the informatic angels and daemons also sighted by Michel Serres and gathered into his multi-volume *Hermes* and his *Angels: A Modern Myth*. The "middle ground" of the "quasi-objects, quasi-subjects" figures at once in the daemonic realm of Western mythopoetic anthropomorphosis *and* as a picture of the material nature of reality-construction through communication in an always-already mediated world. The real is what it is, but insofar as we can grasp and deal with it, it is also a virtual realm of systematic transmissions and receptions. Thus Latour insists that the networks traced by quasi-objects are "simultaneously real, discursive, and social" (*Modern* 64). They present both media-technological and systems-operational guises that the student of the technosciences must learn to decode and reassemble:

> Such metamorphoses [of quasi-objects] are incomprehensible if only two beings, Nature and Society, have existed from time immemorial, or if the first remains eternal while the second alone is stirred up by history. These metamorphoses become explicable, on the contrary, if we redistribute essence to all the entities that make up this history. But then they stop being simple, more or less faithful intermediaries. They become mediators –that is, actors endowed with the capacity to translate what they transport, to redefine it, redeploy it, and also to betray it. The serfs have become free citizens once more. (Latour, *Modern* 81)

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[8] See CLARKE, *Allegories* passim.

Citizenship in a "republic of things" under a "nonmodern Constitution," Latour concludes, depends on the capacity of the quasi-object/quasi-subjects to shoulder referential burdens, to bind real connections among natural and cultural agencies.

By the same token, things and persons hold onto existence insofar as quasi-objects/quasi-subjects will carry their burden of being: "I call this transcendence that lacks a contrary 'delegation.' The utterance, or the delegation, or the sending of a message or a messenger, makes it possible to remain in presence —that is, to exist" (*Modern* 129). I take this to mean that, while nature does transcend society, and society does transcend nature, neither of these autonomies is purely autonomous. Neither could exist if their differences depended on the negation of the other. Remaining in presence means maintaining the presence of the Other. Natural and social systems both subsist as *environments* of the other, and the system/environment relation is a two-sided form, a mutual supplementation, a doppelgänger and not a dialectical antithesis.

If one allows the extension of sociality beyond human conversations to the communications of other living things —all of whom signal to their own in order to survive, *and* to the nonliving things that get swept up and redefined by natural and social systems, then life and its evolution, including the emergence and networking of minds and societies across the living spectrum, is as much a social as a natural phenomenon.[9] So neither nature nor society could remain in being without the translational mediations that course between them:

> All durability, all solidity, all permanence will have to be paid for by its mediators. It is this exploration of a transcendence without a contrary that makes our world so very unmodern, with all those nuncios, mediators, delegates, fetishes, machines, figurines, instruments, representatives, angels, lieutenants, spokespersons and cherubim. (Latour, *Modern* 129)

For Latour, that we can now *see* (if we wish to look) the intermingled transformativity of natures/cultures marks our status as nonmodern. Our "world ceased to be modern when we replaced all essences with the mediators, delegates and translators that gave them meaning. That is why we do not yet recognize it. It has taken on an ancient aspect, with all those delegates, angels and lieutenants" (*Modern* 129). While this *is* anachronistic, it is neither neopaganism nor "antimodernism" —rather, it is *neocybernetics*, a further turn on the conceptual events of the 1960s that Calvino was treating in his coupling of cybernetics and ghosts. When the real and the daemonic are observed to emerge and merge in both technological and narrative constructions, classical human persons —the extra-environmental

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[9] On communication as a concept moving across the animal/human division, see Wolfe, "In the Shadow of Wittgenstein's Lion: Language, Ethics, and the Question of the Animal" (*Zoontologies* 1-57).

essences of selves, souls maintained by ideal bodily stabilities— become at once nonmodern and posthumanist, relativized actors performing operational functions and metamorphic transformations within natural/social networks and systems. This is not a demotion of the human but an elevation of the nonhuman into proper discursive representation.

4. ANTHROPOS AND MORPHISM

Latour calls this ontological condition of medial transformativity "morphism," arriving at that term by deleting from "anthropomorphism" the humanist idealization of *anthropos*. We remain embedded in "the old anthropological matrix,"[10] but the "ancient aspect" of our nonmodern daemonic world is not to be confused with premodern daemonism, which *did* have a contrary —the modern Constitution. In Latour's allegory of real politics, nonmodern morphism arises from the redistribution of being *after* the reworking of the modern Constitution to convene a new parliament of hybrids. This metaphysical liberalism is a posthumanist if not a *posthuman* development. While not calling for some technoevolutionary transcendence of the human —why bother when one can have "transcendence without a contrary"? — in this prophecy the human is relativized by its re-entry into worldly ensembles with the nonhuman. "Where are we to situate the human? A historical succession of quasi-objects, quasi-subjects, it is impossible to define the human by an essence" (*Modern* 136). Rather, the human demands ongoing nonmodern reassembling —which is to say, in words Latour does not use, that the human is reobserved as a systems phenomenon of autopoietic networks. To maintain its further autopoiesis in the face of its previous autopoiesis (e.g., the rise of modern technoscience), human modernity must be "redistributed" along the middle ground with the redistributions of the natural and the social:

> If the human does not possess a stable form, it is not formless for all that. If, instead of attaching it to one constitutional pole or the other, we move it closer to the middle, it becomes the mediator and even the intersection of the two... The expression "anthropomorphic" considerably underestimates our humanity. We should be talking about morphism. Morphism is the place where technomorphisms, zoomorphisms, phusimorphisms, ideomorphisms, theomorphisms, sociomorphisms, psychomorphisms, all come together. Their alliance and their exchanges, taken together, are what define the *anthropos*. A weaver of morphisms —isn't that enough of a definition? (*Modern* 137)

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[10] "No one has ever heard of a collective that did not mobilize heaven and earth in its composition, along with bodies and souls, property and law, gods and ancestors, powers and beliefs, beasts and fictional beings. [...] Such is the ancient anthropological matrix, the one we have never abandoned. But this common matrix defines only the point of departure of comparative anthropology" (Latour, *Modern* 107).

To accept this definition is to allow the distinction between the human and the daemonic to lapse: daemonic metamorphosis always was a self-reflexive projection of the human. It is to see that the daemonic situation of medial contingency remains a real allegory of the human, and that this allegory has now been heightened by the proliferation of scientific powers and informatic technologies. "Transcendence without a contrary": or, society is maintained only through communication; we communicate only through media; therefore, we maintain without surpassing the medial contingencies of the construction of the human —and narrative systems perform this maintenance. "The human is in the delegation itself, in the pass, in the sending, in the continuous exchange of forms," and this status is distributable to everything we touch or that touches us: "Human nature is the set of its delegates and its representatives, its figures and its messengers" (*Modern* 138).

5. QUASI-OBJECTS AND BEAST PEOPLE:
THE ISLAND OF DR. MOREAU

The non-essential or constructed nature of the quasi-object returns us to evolutionary theory. Darwin's *Origin of Species* concludes with a powerful prediction about the intellectual transformations in store for human thought, once his explanations of biological form and transformation are accepted: "we shall have to treat species in the same manner as those naturalists treat genera, who admit that genera are artificial combinations made for convenience. This may not be a cheering prospect; but we shall at least be freed from the vain search for the undiscovered and undiscoverable essence of the term species" (Darwin 172). The quasi-object is one of the later progeny of this liberation from essence. Credence in the origin of all species from the environmental selection of random genetic variations begins to render untenable the notion of a theological or a biological essence of humanity. Evolution unfixes the subject status of the human and the cultural finality of the modern. We are no longer above the beasts, animals no longer merely bestial, and no race or variety of *Homo sapiens* can expect to hold preeminence over another race or species without itself being superseded in turn. All this, it has been broadly observed, was profoundly disturbing to Victorian complacencies, and remains so today.

But Wells's Beast People are also the progeny of Darwin's equally influential and even more problematic statement of 1872, *The Descent of Man*, in which text his cultural conclusions as often as not resemble those of the contemporary religious conservatives who still cast aspersions on his name. The *Descent*'s inclusion of the human in the story of evolution pressed Darwin harder toward spatial metaphors of "height" and "depth" to denote greater and lesser evolutionary "perfection." Relative to the *Origin*, this rhetoric represents a regressive trend, a residual theologism (or, modern Constitutionalism maintaining distinctions between the human and the nonhuman) that leaves its marks on the scientific idealism of Dr. Moreau.

From this angle, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is a tale about a technoscientific project in "higher" evolution thorough surgical metamorphosis. Dr. Moreau eventually asserts to the narrator Prendick, "These creatures you have seen are animals

carven and wrought into new shapes" (Wells 53). The narrative imagines the deliberate transformation of nonhumans, individual animals of various mammalian species, into humanoid beings. While this "vivisection" plot has typically called forth ethical readings of the human/animal division, what Latour helps us see is that the successes and failures of Moreau's experiments are as much "social" as "natural." That is, Moreau's creations, once set into being, are the result of mediations sustained and relinquished in the networks of communication called forth by the Beast People's own need (in the higher realism of this fable) for emergent systems capable of endowing these newly-minted quasi-subjects with functioning social identities. The individualistic Moreau goes only from one surgical subject to the next, abandoning the Beast People to form their own social system based on a common "origin."

As descended from another creation-abandoner, Victor Frankenstein, Moreau is no longer a neurotic late adolescent but a degenerate Prometheus, a sociopathic vivisectionist graybeard —a nonconformist idealist gone *really* bad like a morbid Thoreau, whose Walden is not a suburb of Boston but a desert island in the South Pacific. In Latourian terms, Moreau comes forward as a demagogue of the modern Constitution, as his effort to master evolution by purifying the bestial can only manufacture hybrids of human and animal. That is, his ideology seeks separation while his methodology practices translation. Accordingly, up until the final catastrophe of the narrative, when a beast person runs amuck and slays its creator, Moreau's lab remains out of sight. Even as sited in an unknown or forgotten location —a place of near (but not total) social exile, the bench where these quasi-objects are manufactured remains under wraps. Before that climax, however, the story brings us to another, somewhat less occulted scene of attempted humanization, the Beast People's commons, where they take it upon themselves to "construct" their humanity through the recitation of ritual prohibition chants. This is one of the narrative's most trenchant strokes: even though religious observances still rival the modern sciences in the vocation of soul making (or "essence production"), the sciences have helped to relativize their anthropological stock in trade —the social construction of the human.

An uninvited witness to Moreau's experimental industries, Prendick is no Latourian observer, at least, not at first. What suspense the story generates involves the delay in his realization that Moreau is not animalizing humans but humanizing animals. As in *The Time Machine*, Wells presents a would-be anthropological interpreter whose first attempts to read the status of enigmatic beings within an enigmatic landscape miss the mark. Prendick's "tangle of mystification" (24) is twisted tighter when he encounters "three creatures" performing a "mysterious rite": They

> were human in shape, and yet human beings with the strangest air about them of some familiar animal. Each of these creatures, despite its human form, its rag of clothing, and the rough humanity of its bodily form, had woven into it, into its movements, into the expression of its countenance, into its whole presence, some now irresistible suggestion of a hog, a swinish taint, the unmistakable mark of the beast. (29)

Prendick's religious cliché reminds us that traditional ontology had an imprecise label for such confusions of fixed categories: "monstrosity." Under an evolutionary regime, however, this category is recognized as a religious rather than scientific concept. The nonmodern observer sees that monsters do not oppose but rather allegorize the human; they are self-referential projections of the Other. And Prendick's realization of this, although he resists it and can't process it when it comes, is the crux of the tale. Once Prendick has comprehended their artefactual origins, however, he can see Moreau's beast menagerie more clearly as a proliferation of hybrid quasi-objects:

> The two most formidable animal-men were my Leopard Man and a creature made of hyæna and swine. Larger than these were the three bull creatures who pulled in the boat. Then came the Silvery Hairy Man, who was also the Sayer of the Law, M'ling, and a satyr-like creature of ape and goat. There were three Swine Men and a Swine Woman, a Horse-Rhinoceros creature, and several other females whose sources I did not ascertain. There were several Wolf creatures, a Bear-Bull, and a Saint Bernard Dog Man. (62)

The demand placed upon the Beast People to deny their animal origins parodies the moral conflicts of a "humanity" constructed on Modern essentialist premises of a human sociality outside of nature, premises that remain tied to the very theological essentialisms the modern Constitution purportedly displaced: "A series of propositions called the Law (I had already heard them recited) battled in their minds with the deep-seated, ever-rebellious cravings of their animal natures. This Law they were ever repeating, I found, and ever breaking" (61). The Beast People have to supplement through ritual communication what Moreau had hoped to accomplish only through surgical reconstruction: the production of the human. In a travesty of religious ritual, the Sayer of the Law chants prohibitions upon bestiality:

> "Not to go on all-fours; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?"
> "Not to suck up Drink; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?"
> "Not to eat Fish or Flesh; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?"
> "Not to claw Bark of Trees; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?"
> "Not to chase other Men; *that* is the Law. Are we not Men?" (42)

It seems that Moreau did not dictate these commandments to the Sayer of the Law or to his People. He tells Prendick:

> 'They go. I turn them out when I begin to feel the beast in them, and presently they wander there. [...] There is a kind of travesty of humanity over there. [...] I take no interest in them. I fancy they follow in the lines the Kanaka missionary marked out, and have a kind of mockery of a rational life —poor beasts!' (59)

But however the Beast People acquired their totemic tutelage, it is as if the full text of their sayings has self-organized out of communications within the collective of the cast-off "subjects" of Moreau's experiments as they attempt to assume

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and maintain forms of linguistic subjectivity appropriate to their transformed status as humanized beings.

In their Law the Beast People possess at least an intuition of their scriptedness, that is, of their inscription as quasi-objects within a technoscientific network and thus of the need to maintain their translations into being through the circulation of social communication. This is an aspect of their brief existence that escapes Moreau completely, who, in his difficulties getting the surgical humanization to stick, disastrously falls back on pre-Darwinian notions of fixed essences: "I have been doing better," he tells Prendick; "but somehow the things drift back again, the stubborn beast-flesh grows, day by day, back again" (57). If we triangulate Moreau and Prendick from Latour's middle ground, Wells's tale already says that it is their attitudes (like the modern Constitution itself) that are truly anachronistic. What *The Island of Dr. Moreau* says is that the human is essentially non-essential. The human joins the rest of evolutionary life as a quasi-object resulting from a "weaving of morphisms."

For given the capacities of the Beast People for linguistic commerce of human type, it is not Moreau's surgical constructions that have failed. The problem is not ontological but epistemological: What dooms his project is the failure of his own conviction in the status of his results. Moreau has not completed the job of *constructing* his facts: "These creatures of mine seemed strange and uncanny to you as soon as you began to observe them, but to me, just after I make them, they seem to be indisputable human beings. It's afterwards as I observe them that the persuasion fades" (58). Moreau's Promethean blinders cause him, like Victor Frankenstein, to abandon his less-than-perfect creations. And so, to see matters from the other side, Prendick must stumble upon their jungle clearing, where like homeless street kids they gather to chant their humanity into being. The Beast People are woven and further weave themselves from natural and social morphisms. Latour's parallel view of the morphism of the human is a neocybernetic turn putting operational flesh on the bones of the postmodern observation that the human is a rhetorical construction. Indeed, the human lies not in the possession of an essence but in the eliciting and instrumentalizing of a conviction, in a "persuasion" that it is present —but also, in Latour's terms, in the continuous translation of itself into being by social communications.

Latour's *Aramis or the Love of Technology* dissects another failed technoscientific project in artefactual animation, the attempted construction and eventual termination of an innovative Parisian "smart" subway network. In that text Latour notes: "There are two models for studying [technological] innovations: the linear model and the whirlwind model. Or, if you prefer, the diffusion model and the translation model" (118). Latour then relates the distinction between diffusion and translation models to one between theological narrative genres implied by these different operational forms. "In the first model, the initial idea emerges fully armed from the head of Zeus," and this yields "a Protestant narrative" (118, 119), or, one of special dispensation or individual election unbeholden to the mediation of networks or collective institutions. Clearly Dr. Moreau is expecting his creations, once they burst forth from his scalpel and operating theater, to save their own dubious souls. "In the second model, the initial idea barely counts. It's a gadget, a whatch-

amacallit, a weakling at best. [...] In the translation model, there is *no transportation without transformation*," and this yields a "Catholic narrative[, a] narrative of incarnation" (119), in which, as it were, the animating spirit can be received only through its repeated translations into wine, wafer, and collective ritual.

I read Latour's sectarian analogues for the narrative exposition of technological networks as translating or desublimating classical spirituality and its residual basis in daemonic metamorphosis, or the ambivalence of the sacred —the potential for spiritual transubstantiations among the bestial, the human, and the divine— into nonmodern daemonic *morphism* —or, the "variable-ontology world" of the animal, the mechanical, and the human (*Aramis* 173). In this post-Darwinian world, "the human form is as unknown to us as the nonhuman"; thus, "it is better to speak of *(x)-morphism* instead of becoming indignant when humans are treated as nonhumans or vice versa" (*Aramis* 227).

The metamorphic transformations of bodies —both fictive and artefactual mixings of the human and the nonhuman— recur from archaic to contemporary times, taking daemonic shapes ranging form the magical to the technological. As virtual nonmoderns despite our Modern upbringings, along with Moreau's Beast People we remain within the "ancient anthropological matrix," where "we have never stopped building our collectives with raw materials made of poor humans and humble nonhumans" (Latour, *Modern* 115). Textual metamorphs and technoscientific quasi-objects are both mediating transformers performing sociomythic sorting operations, negotiating the relations not of heaven and earth, but of nature and society. Latour's hybrids and quasi-objects, then, participate in a continuous production of ancient and current cultural mediators whose common attribute is a propensity to the metamorphic transformation of given and normative forms. Viewed through the lens of Latour's network concepts, the recursive imageries of literary metamorphoses resonate with the operational evolutions, the mutations and occasional catastrophes, of natural and social systems.

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