III Literature – Self and Narrativity
Abstract: This paper will resituate the question of narrative self-production in its exposure to an “outside” (Blanchot, 1969) in the context of scientific discourse. It will offer an analysis of the first three texts Pascal Quignard’s *Dernière royaume* sequence (2002) in order to argue that they self-reflexively perform a logic of heteropoiesis, understood here as narrative self-production by way of a relation to a constitutive exteriority which is at the very same time a temporal dimension of anteriority. This anteriority is posed in naturalistic terms such that human narrative and meaning can be understood as a continuation of natural and biological processes (Maturana and Veralta, 1980). The paper will reconfigure the self-reflexive, immanent, and autopoietic “sense” of the living organism as an openness and exposure to an anterior-exterior. It will argue that the heteropoietic logic of Quignard’s texts allows for the beginnings of a naturalistic theory of narrative to be sketched.

Keywords: narrative; self; autopoiesis; heteropoiesis; Quignard; naturalism.

1 Introduction

The idea that the self and forms of self-identity are somehow narrated or are the product of processes of reflexive narration is well established within recent and contemporary philosophy and theory.¹ Insofar as the self can be said to be constituted both *in* and *as* narrative, narration and narrativity more generally might be understood as intrinsically *autopoietic* processes.² In this way, it could be said

---

¹ In her essay “The Narrative Self” Marya Schechtman (2011) provides an excellent critical overview and assessment of narrative theories of the self, taking in hermeneutic theories (MacIntyre, Ricoeur, Taylor), a range of others (for example, Dennett, Velleman) and challenges to them (Strawson, Zahavi).

² In this context narrative is understood broadly and in general as the power organising meaning and self through some kind of storytelling or sequencing of events and signification as well
that the self, understood as a “narrative self”, is produced, maintained, and reproduced as such from within the processes of self-narration themselves, and through the very act of that self-narration. This might in turn imply, as with understandings of autopoiesis originating in biology (Maturana/Varela) or systems theory (Luhmann), a specific mode of closure, an operative closure according to which the self, in its unity, identity, and agency, emerges in a reflexive self-description that generates selfhood from within the organised structure that the narration of self itself produces.

However, the idea that narrative might be able to produce or articulate an autonomous self or identity by way of a reflexive description that generates internal self-organisation can be set against much twentieth-century literary and narratological theory. Structuralist narratology, for instance, in its quest for an underlying typology or grammar that would offer a universal code or condition of possibility for storytelling as such, suspends the subjective and expressive function of narrative.³ By this account any instance of self or identity produced by narration would be a mere effect of an anterior structure or system which, as an intersubjective condition of possibility, would itself be radically impersonal or anonymous. The various permutations of structuralism in relation to narrative in its broadest sense are exemplified in the itinerary of Roland Barthes from his early accounts of cultural myth and the structural analysis of narrative, through to his later (in)famous proclamation of the “death of the author” and the more fragmentary final understanding of text as an interweaving of impersonal cultural codes (see Barthes 1954; 1964; 1970; 1973). According to such accounts, narration and narrativity, far from implying closure, and specifically the operative closure of a system that generates its own terms of reference and immanent structure, in fact imply a constitutive opening onto an exteriority, onto an anterior conditioning outside. They do so insofar as narrative cannot be produced as such without a relation or reference to an external and prior system of codes and structures which acts as its impersonal or anonymous condition of possibility.

In this tension between accounts of narrative understood as the “closed”, autopoietic production of the self on the one hand, and, on the other, as the “open” constitution of the self in and through a relation to the exteriority and an-

---

³ Broadly speaking the reference here is to the structuralist narratology as developed by the likes of Tvetan Todorov, Gérard Genette (Todorov 1971; Genette 2007), and a wider tendency to bracket or suspend authorial intention that one finds variably in Russian formalism or the New Criticism of Wimsatt & Beardsley (for example, their understanding of the intentional fallacy and the former’s work on the verbal icon [Wimsatt 1970]).
teriority of a conditioning “outside”, the reflexive production of selfhood encounters a decisive moment of ambivalence or equivocation. For, in order to be the autonomous and autopoietic self that one is, one depends on self-narration and yet at the same time self-narration itself depends in turn on heteronomous structures that as such are decisively not of the self.

This ambivalence or equivocation of the narrative production of self can arguably also be seen to be at play in biological accounts of the individuality of the living organism. Indeed, the tension between the closure of self-reproducing autopoietic systems and their necessary opening onto an anterior condition of possibility is arguably not only constitutive of all reflexive self-production as such but can also offer a means of discerning the ways in which different modes or ontological regimes of self-production exist in relation to each other. In this context the domains of biological life that sustain the individual organism on the one hand and, on the other, the symbolic and linguistic life sustaining the “narrative self” can be understood in a relation of continuity with each other. In light of this, the “auto” of autopoiesis, as a possibility of self-(re)production and self-maintenance needs to be qualified and also understood as the “hetero” of a renewed conception or logic of “heteropoiesis”, understood now as the possibility of self-(re)production and self-maintenance in relation to a constitutive other, to an anterior field of alterity and exteriority. This renewed sense of heteropoiesis can illuminate the manner in which any given level of self-organisation or self-production is constituted in relation to an anterior-exterior or to a preceding level as its condition of possibility: thus narrative has as its condition a prior human symbolic order or coded system, human symbolic life has as its prior condition an order of sense and meaning which is that of biological life, biological life has its prior condition in biochemical signalling, genetic coding, and sense-relations that are both immanent to the living organism and externally or environmentally relational.

What follows will aim to elucidate this logic of heteropoiesis as a means of specifying and elaborating the continuity between the symbolic and the biological. It will do so by way of a parallel and comparative analysis of two seemingly distinct and different moments: the status of literary narration in Pascal Quignard’s writing and the contrasting theories of biological individuality developed by Maturana and Varela and Georges Canguilhem respectively. In each case

---

4 Maturana/Varela make distinction between autopoiesis (self-organisation), allopoiesis, and heteropoiesis (organisation of another). The latter term heteropoiesis has been recast in the context of this discussion and its argument specifically on the basis of the critique of the theory of autopoiesis in relation to Canguilhem such that the “auto-” of poiesis is configured as also being always already a “hetero-”.
the “auto” of autopoiesis will be problematised in its relation to a conditioning anteriority and/or exteriority. The beginnings of a novel naturalistic theory of narrative and symbolic meaning can be sketched out here. The naturalism at stake is one which, following the lead given by Quignard in the first three volumes of his Dernier royaume [Last Kingdom] sequence (Quignard 2002a; 2002b; 2002c), embeds narrative and symbolic meaning in the anteriority of biological life and a non-human, pre-symbolic order of sense and meaning.

2 Narrative Voice and Impersonality

The question of narrative identity and self is arguably inseparable from that of narrative voice and from the conundrum posed by Roland Barthes when he asks in relation to authors and writers: “Who speaks?” (Barthes 1981, p. 147). Whether it is a question of literary or fictional narrative or indeed any mode of narration in any form the question of the who or of the agency underpinning that act of narration is by no means straightforward. It is Maurice Blanchot who perhaps more than any other literary-philosophical thinker in France in the twentieth century stakes out a theory of the impersonality and anonymity of literary narrative in writings of the 1930s and 40s, one which he maintains throughout his long career. His argument is that in literature the voice that speaks in narrative is always in some way or another a restitution of authorial subjectivity and self in favour of an impersonal and anonymous voice of writing. In a chapter of his later work L’Entretien infini [The Infinite Conversation] (Blanchot 1969) entitled “The Narrative Voice”, he extends this anonymity to narration and narrativity in general and makes what for him is by now a typical claim, one which directly challenges the understanding that narrative has an essentially autopoietic function: “The narrative ‘he’ or ‘it’ unseats every subject just as it disappropriates all transitive action and all objective possibility” (Blanchot 1969, pp. 563–564). At first sight, and certainly to those not familiar with Blanchot’s thought, the claim is a strange one and at best counterintuitive. Counterintuitive because, even if one sets aside the theories of the “narrative self” alluded to at

---

5 All references to Quignard’s 2002 trilogy will be to the original French editions and will be cited in my translation. All 2002 references are to Quignard’s trilogy unless otherwise specified.

6 For a more wide-ranging discussion of naturalism in contemporary post-deconstructive thought see James, The Technique of Thought (James 2019). The argument concerning heteropoiesis in this chapter is a further development of that advanced in this book and Quignard’s naturalism should be understood in terms of the post-continental naturalism elaborated in the The Technique of Thought.
the beginning of this discussion, the most simple definition of any kind of storytelling implies, one might think, some kind of “she”, “he”, “I”, or “it”, and with this the transitivity of narrated actions, objective possibility of some kind or another, and above all the individual or collective subjectivity of the experiences that actions entail, together with that of the narrative act itself. Arguably the tension identified above between narrative as the “closed” autopoietic production of self on the one hand and as the “open” constitution of self in a preceding, anonymous other is clearly discernible in the counterintuitive force of Blanchot’s account of narrative voice. Pascal Quignard’s characterisation of narration and narrativity in the first three volumes of his Dernier royaume sequence resonates very closely with that of Blanchot and can be shown to exemplify the logic of heteropoiesis that is being elaborated here.

3 Heteropoiesis I: Narrative and the Anterior Other

On the face of it the first three volumes of Quignard’s Dernier royaume, comprising Les Ombres errantes ([The Roaming Shadows] Quignard 2002a), Sur le jadis ([untranslated] Quignard 2002b) and Abîmes ([Abysses] Quignard 2002c) and which were controversially awarded the Prix Goncourt in 2002, may seem an unlikely case study for a general reflection on narrative. The works appear to belong to no particular genre and consist of fragments of reflections and recollections derived from Quignard’s personal experience and from the vast breadth of his learning and reading, fragments of memory, of tales, stories, and of cultural and historical references drawn from across huge stretches of time and space. Yet in all this fragmentary discourse and generic undecidability it is precisely the status of narrative and of narrativity that is perhaps most centrally in question.

The critical reception of Dernier royaume has noted its indeterminacy of genre and resolutely fragmentary structure. For instance, in Agnès Cousin de Ravel’s biography of Quignard, Pascal Quignard: Vies, œuvres (Cousin de Ravel 2017) this generic indeterminacy and fragmentation is clearly acknowledged but is nevertheless subordinated to a greater guiding unity of authorial consciousness and intention, one which communicates a disparate yet still subjective affective need according to the threads of personal memory, childhood experience, adult encounters, and readings in literature and which then ties all of these together with history and myth through the agency of this very authorial consciousness (Cousin de Ravel 2017, p. 168). By the same token Quignard’s
more general exploration and interrogation of narrative and narrativity has also been noted but has, once again, been related to the activity of authorial intention, consciousness and, indeed, unconscious. So for example, in Bernard Vouilloux’s critical account of the status of the image in Quignard’s writing literary narration is described as the means by which the mind gives form to a certain opaqueness of (un)conscious life implying once again the centrality of a guiding agency and narrating self: “For Quignard [...] narrativity [...], ‘figurative narration’ [...] [is] the materialisation of that obscure gesture by which the mind links dreams and phantasms together” (Vouilloux 2010, p. 45). Yet what is perhaps most striking about the first three volumes of Dernier royaume is the extent to which they can be taken as a prolonged consistent reflection on narrative in its relation to desire and absence as a fundamental dimension of alterity which precedes or is anterior to the act of narration and which is also anterior to the authorial consciousness or subjectivity that narrates.

The nostalgic tonality of Quignard’s writing in general and of Dernier royaume in particular is also very well documented within its critical reception (see for example Sautel 2002 and Margentin 2009). Such a nostalgic tonality and its strongly subjective dimension cannot indeed be denied and clearly marks Quigmard’s writing to a degree. Yet the focus on nostalgic affect also undeniably places the emphasis once more on the relation of narration to authorial consciousness, to the self that would be the bearer and site of this nostalgia. This ignores the extent to which a central concern in these texts is the relation of narrative to a dimension of anteriority which decisively precedes authorial consciousness and any identifiable or locatable past, one which is largely impersonal, collective, and anonymous.

In this context, and by way of an initial or preliminary gloss on Quignard’s idiosyncratic substantival use of the term “le jadis”, it might be noted that its eponymous usage in Sur le jadis refers very explicitly to an anteriority which is not simply that of a personal past or indeed of any kind of known past that can be straightforwardly recalled and determined in the present. Quignard puts this in clear terms which relate narrativity in general to posteriority irrespective of any personal affects that may be at play:

Human fictions are destined to the preterite because narration can only be perceived as being posterior to the story that is recounted. Time precedes all narratives which are the form-by-which-time-becomes-orientated. Every story that is recounted is the past of narrative voice. (Quignard 2002b, p. 162)

In one sense this reflection says no more than the obvious, most simply, that the traditional “once upon a time” of storytelling does not and cannot coincide with
the time of the telling of any given story. But the implications of this temporal non-coincidence are arguably very great indeed and recall Blanchot’s formulation regarding narrative voice. For what this temporal non-coincidence means is that narrative is and can only be predicated on the absence of that which it makes present and therefore that what we might take to be its substantive or subjective content, its interiority if you like, is and can only be a void of substance and subjectivity exposed as a radical exteriority. For all its apparently fundamental status as the production of personal affect, of narrative self and subjectivity, narrative here is paradoxically also the production of the radical absence of an anterior instance which will forever evade presence, production, or presentation. “Every linguistic narrative”, writes Quignard in Abîmes, “consists in inferring from that which is anterior in order make present that which is not there” (Quignard 2002c, p. 123).

If we follow the logic of Quignard’s understanding of narrative such as it is given here, then the consequences for the identity of narrative voice and therefore of “narrative self” are far reaching. The self or subjectivity produced in and by narrative are not themselves, or at least are not self-identical since they are as much absent as present. The transitive actions and objective possibilities that are narrated are likewise struck by intransitivity and impossibility: that which happens does not happen, that which is is not and cannot be. Or again the interiority that narrative is intended to circumscribe, organise, and therefore create as an autonomous closed form, is always already an ungraspable and unpresentable exteriority, is inhabited by and constituted in that which precedes its narrative circumscription and organisation. Interiority and autonomy are constituted in, by, and as exteriority and heteronomy: “We are that which we are not” (Quignard 2002b, p. 148). In short, autopoiesis is always already also heteropoiesis.

The notion that an inside is always marked, affected, or constituted by its outside, that the self is constituted in the other, sameness in difference, identity in alterity is not of course restricted to the domain of the structuralist narratological theory that was alluded to at the beginning of this discussion. It is one of the core assumptions and commonplaces of what has come to be associated, for better or worse, with deconstruction, poststructuralism, or more broadly and loosely, with so-called “French theory”.

Indeed, the embeddedness of Quignard’s thinking and writing in a specific French milieu associated with modernist and postmodernist aestheticism, with the critique of representation and identity and all the supposed opacity, abstruseness, and elitism with which these are sometimes associated, arguably lies at the heart of the controversies surrounding the first three volumes of Dernier royaume and the bestowal of the Prix Goncourt on them in 2002. The Franco-Spanish writer Jorge Semprun was amongst the members of the Goncourt jury
who violently opposed the decision to award the Prix Goncourt to Quignard, remarking acidly, that *Les Ombres errantes* offered “nothing new” and that it was “very Parisian, chic” (cited in Cousin de Ravel 2017, p. 169). Yet, whilst Quignard’s writing here can indeed be situated within, and understood in relation to, a very specific French context and tradition, Semprun’s claim that it offers nothing new and that it is simply an avatar of a well-established Parisian postmodern aestheticism appears at best partial and one-sided, betraying a parochial *parti pris* of the very kind he attributes to Quignard himself. For what is most decisive, defining, and original in Quignard’s writing on narrative, temporality, and anteriority is what can be called his thoroughgoing *naturalism*, that is to say, his persistent references to biological life and his insistence that anteriority, the “jadis”, be ultimately conceived in biological or zoological terms. Throughout these three works Quignard resolutely and consistently affirms the continuity of humanity and human symbolic forms with the biological and the zoological.

This distinctly naturalist dimension of Quignard’s writing, whose originality and novelty Semprun singularly fails to acknowledge or understand, has perhaps not yet found a critical language according to which it can be adequately described and specified. This may be because the term naturalism sits uncomfortably within this context, associated as it is with Anglo-American schools of philosophy which are aligned and orientated toward the natural sciences (for example, Sellars, Quine, D. Lewis) and their latter-day avatars in bodies of thought that tend to be eliminative with regard to qualitative experience, and anything that escapes determination by means of empirical science including, at its extremes, the life of consciousness itself (for example, Paul and Patricia Churchland, Ladyman and Ross). As Cousin de Ravel notes with reference to Quignard’s collaborative activities around the filmic adaptation of his work he clearly “shares misgivings concerning naturalism and psychology” (Cousin de Ravel 2017, p. 155). This might suggest that on both an aesthetic and philosophical level “naturalism” as we normally understand it is not an appropriate term to apply to Quignard’s œuvre.

And yet critics have clearly acknowledged the “zoological” dimension of his work as being fundamental. Vouilloux’s account of the status of the image in Quignard’s writing notes that it has clear zoological properties that allow the image to reveal what the human animal shares with its non-human counterparts and in such a way that it is decisively “anchored in the zoosphere” (Vouilloux 2010, p. 151). More recently Mireille Calle-Gruber has drawn attention to the way in which Quignard’s writing foregrounds “the zoological zone within the human” and the “Primordial, elemental physis” which generates human history (Caille-Gruber 2018, pp. 162, 163). So, whilst acknowledging, that Quignard offers us nothing that can be called “naturalist” in the sense ascribed to the term with-
in the Anglo-American tradition and its contemporary philosophical legacy, this zoological dimension invites us nevertheless to retain the term in relation to his writing. If by “naturalist” we understand a thought or writing that rejects all dualism and thereby posits some kind of explicit continuity between the zoological and the human, the biological and the symbolic, the body and consciousness, then the term not only applies to Quignard’s writing but he emerges as a writer who recasts naturalism itself into a decidedly distinct and original form.

Indeed, such a recasting emerges as one of the central preoccupations of the first three volumes of Dernier royaume. Evidence of this naturalist orientation and of Quignard’s concern to place narrative and story-telling back into a continuity with a zoological world that precedes them abounds in the texts themselves: “Fiction”, Quignard writes, “plunges back into the zoologically implicit. Into all that is contained in nature” (Quignard 2002b, p. 160). He maintains this on the basis of a general affirmation of the embeddedness of human life within wider natural and biological life: “I posit that nature, [...] is the terrestrial, luminous, sunlit, atmospheric, natal, and final spectacle of the human” (Quignard 2002b, p. 100). The emphasis on natality and finality here is elsewhere integrated into something like a cyclical, semi-mystical, or ecstatic solar vision where all nature, including all human life, is placed on one extensive and continuum of phototropic and energetic being:

We come from water just as we come from the sea. First, we descend from bacteria. Then we descend from apes....

All humans and mountains, all flowers, all fish, all carps, towns, musical instruments, the apes, books, all our faces turn around the sun. (Quignard 2002a, p. 179)

The integration or conjoining of the natural and the “artificial” (towns) or the aesthetic (musical instruments, books) emphasises Quignard’s persistent affirmation that art is both continuous with and a retroactive relation to this natural and natal origin of the human within the biological and the zoological.

It would be easy to assimilate these qualities of art and fiction to an exclusively nostalgic affect on the part of the human more generally and of the author of Dernier royaume in particular (again see Margentin 2009). If fiction “plunges back into the zoologically implicit” this is because, for Quignard more generally, “Originary natural heterogeneity is the destiny of art” (Quignard 2002a, p. 66). The nostalgic reading of Quignard would discern within this destiny of art a desire to return to a pre-natal state or oneness with nature, to overcome the alienation of the human within nature and a certain melancholy at the impossibility of doing so. Yet the relation of fiction, narrative, and art more generally to nature that Quignard posits is far from exclusively, or indeed principally, nostalgic in its
tonality. The emphasis is rather on the vital and the generative: “narration [...] is alive, or vital, or vitalising, or revivifying” (Quignard 2002a, p. 183).

The emphasis, also, and predominantly, is on the notion that the constitution or the creation of the human per se, of human consciousness, activity, and symbolic life, always takes place in relation to the natural or biological world which precedes it. In this way Quignard’s writing presents, not an exclusively or primarily melancholic and nostalgic tonality in his evocation of the natural world, but rather one that affirms the biological, and zoological constitution of the human and of human psychic and symbolic life according to the logic of heteropoiesis such as it is being elaborated here.

In Maturana and Varela’s biological theory that will be discussed below a distinction is made between “autopoiesis” as the self-production, reproduction, and self-maintenance of a living organism or system and the “allopoiesis” of systems which “have as the product of their functioning something different from themselves” (Maturana/Varela 1980, p. 80). Self-production and the production of something other than oneself give the “auto-” and the “allo-” to these opposing terms. Quignard, however, is very clear that, when it comes to human beings at least, our capacity for self-production is always, and at every level, mediated through a relation to a prior other: “every human creature, born of the other, grounded on the other, educated by the other, only functions ab alio, by way of and subject to the chance of an irreducible alterity. We are nothing but derived: language, body, memory, everything within us is derived” (Quignard 2002a, 132). This emphasis on derivation is one of the most central and persistent affirmations of these texts by Quignard, indicating the extent to which he affirms self-constitution as heteropoiesis and heteropoiesis itself as belonging to a temporality according to which the past is folded into the present.

So Quignard will insist variably for instance: “We are brought forth by invisible anteriority”, “all psychical life is infiltrated by anterior psychical life”, and “We are all the indivisible sons and daughters of the anterior Other” (Quignard 2002b, pp. 29, 49, 253). What is at stake here most generally is a dimension of time, and specifically of any given (self-)production in the present moment as being a retention of and constitution via a time past. Once again, the key emphasis Quignard places on time past or on anteriority is less one of nostalgic affect than it is an emphasis on the constitutive dimension of time past.

This is particularly so if one takes into account Quignard’s insistence, alluded to earlier in preliminary terms, that this dimension of time past understood as “le jadis” is not simply a past present moment that has gone by and that can be recalled, mourned, and thereby reconstituted as such in the present through an act of memory or storytelling. As Quignard himself puts it in Abîmes: “There is a time gone by that flows and that cannot be found in the past” [Il y a un jadis qui
s’écoule qui ne se trouve pas dans le passé] (Quignard 2002c, p. 218). The word “jadis” in French is normally an adverbial form meaning “once”, “formerly”, “erstwhile”, or “long ago”. Quignard’s use of the term as a noun is therefore highly idiosyncratic since it would be more normal to speak of “le temps jadis” which could be rendered a little archaically in English as “bygone days”. In this idiosyncratic usage Quignard opposes “le passé” understood as a known or remembered past with “le jadis” understood as an anterior dimension which is unlocatable as a past instance of presence and which, in constituting the present as such, also evades its grasp and is therefore in a sense immemorial. To this extent Quignard’s “jadis” is almost impossible to translate precisely into English and recalls the virtual dimension of the past of Jacques Derrida’s “trace” (Derrida 1967). Unlike Derrida, however, and as should by now be abundantly clear, Quignard associates the anteriority of “le jadis” unequivocally with nature: “Nature is antique time as that which has always gone before” [La nature c’est le temps ancien comme jadis] (Quignard 2002c, p. 162).

To sum up then, Quignard’s writing should be designated as naturalist because narrative and fiction here are always understood as a relation to and product of an “anterior Other”, an exteriority and alterity that is always posed as a dimension of natural, biological, and zoological life. This account of narrative and fiction is assimilated into a more general account of the human and of human psychical and symbolic life as similarly related to and produced by this anterior world of nature. For Quignard, nature and biological or zoological life has always already been meaningful, and this before all human possibility of meaning, of reading, writing, and of language per se.

But how are we to understand or make theoretical and scientific sense of this naturalist yet still literary-philosophical account of the human and of human symbolic life and their constitution in a biological and zoological anterior Other? Even if Quignard’s naturalism remains decidedly distinct from the broadly reductivist or eliminativist philosophical legacy of Sellars, Quine, and Lewis, if it is still to bear the name of naturalism at all one might expect it to be more alignable with or relatable to a scientific theoretical perspective. And is this at all possible without some form of reductivism? If it is true, against Semprun’s rather hasty and vitriolic judgement, that there is indeed something distinctly new and original in the opening trilogy of Dernier royaume, it may be that a new and original critical language is needed for this novelty to be properly clarified and understood. Here the critical concept of heteropoiesis has been renewed in order to shed clearer light on Quignard’s understanding of narrative and its constitutive relation to an anterior Other. Heteropoiesis now needs to be clarified in a parallel and complementary fashion in relation to biological discourse.
4 Heteropoiesis II: Closure and Openness in Biological Individuality

In order to begin the task of a scientific theoretical clarification of Quignard’s heteropoietic naturalism, the theory of autopoiesis as conceived by Maturana and Varela will be examined in comparison with the biological philosophy of Georges Canguilhem and contemporary biosemiotics.

In their preface to *Autopoiesis and Cognition* the editors note that what Maturana and Varela’s theory proposes is: “a topology in which elements and their relations constitute a closed system, or more radically still, one which from the ‘point of view’ of the system itself, is entirely self-referential and has no ‘outside’” (Maturana/Varela 1980, p. vi). The legacy of this combined emphasis on systemic closure and self-reference arguably haunts the afterlife of the theory of autopoiesis and the critical and polemical debates to which it has given rise. The criticism, of course, often rather crudely made and misplaced, is that the closed self-referentiality of autopoietic organisation, whether it be that of first-order biological systems or second-order social and symbolic systems, directly affirms ontological and epistemological idealism, solipsism, or perniciously relativistic constructivism. Maturana and Varela themselves can offer up sentences which appear to legitimate such criticism. As for instance this well-known line from *The Tree of Knowledge* which appears to affirm a perceptual and cognitive idealism: “We do not see what we do not see, and what we do not see does not exist” (Maturana/Varela 1988, p. 242). Or these lines from *Autopoiesis and Cognition* which point to a form of solipsism: “reality as a universe of independent entities about which we can talk is, necessarily, a fiction” (Maturana/Varela 1980, p. 52).

The charges of idealism and solipsism made against Maturana and Varela’s conception of autopoiesis are not really convincing and do not hold water even in relation to the earliest formulations of the theory. They take great pains to refute such charges, of course, particularly in *The Tree of Knowledge* where they do so by way of the distinction between the organisation and structure of autopoietic systems and their definition as organisationally closed but structurally open (see Wolfe 1998, p. 59). It might be more correct and precise to say that the theory of autopoiesis Maturana and Varela elaborate closely resembles a neurobiological materialisation of the Kantian transcendental *a priori*, according to which those elements exterior to the autopoietic system remain as some kind of undetermined noumenal thing-in-itself.

In any case, the more fundamental critical question that can be asked of the theory of autopoiesis is not whether it leads to idealism, solipsism, or relativism,
but rather whether its claims relating to the fundamental closure of autopoietic organisation actually, really, or in any way adequately describe the reality of self-organising systems. The emphasis on the self-referential closure of organisation and the conception of the enclosed boundedness and unity of living organisms that results from this may in fact be fundamentally misplaced.

Take this sentence from Maturana’s 1970 essay “Biology of Cognition”: “The organism ends at the boundary that its self-referring organisation defines in the maintenance of its identity” (Maturana/Varela 1980, p. 20). This stands in stark and direct contrast to George Canguilhem’s account of the relation of the living organism to its environment given in Knowledge of Life a collection of essays dating from the 1950s and originally published in 1965: “The individuality of the living does not stop at its ectodermic borders any more than it begins at the cell” (Canguilhem 2008, p. 111). For Maturana and Varela the boundary of an organism defines the space of its operative closure and its domain of self-production, maintenance and regulation. For Canguilhem the “ectodermic border” of the organism defines, as will become clear, the organism as a centre of (self-)reference, but it is also a site of exposure to, and relationality or exchange with a surrounding environment which defines the organism in a constitutive openness to its outside. In Canguilhem’s biological theory there is simply no closure in the organisation of the living in relation to its environment, or as he puts it:

From the biological point of view, one must understand that the relationship between the organism and the environment is the same as that between the parts and the whole of an organism [...] the organism [...] lives in a milieu that, in a certain fashion, is to the organism what the organism is to its components (Canguilhem 1965, p. 144; 2008, p. 111).

Rather than being composed of a topology of elements whose relations constitute a closed system of self-reference with no outside, the living organism is, for Canguilhem, constituted in relations of reference that are always orientated towards their outside: biochemical processes relate to molecular microstructures, these to intracellular structures, such structures then relate to the cell, those of the cell to the organ, of the organ to the organism, and then, in the very same way, those of the organism to its surrounding environment.

Decisively the system of reference articulated by biological relations is, by Canguilhem’s account, always an articulation or bearer of a certain kind of meaningfulness. A biological element or instance (for example, process, cell, organ, organism) relates to another element or instance in a manner that that is meaningful for it and is so in such a way that in referring outwards in a meaningful relation it also refers back to itself in and thus constitutes itself as a centre of reference. The biological relation to an outside is therefore semiotic in a cer-
tain sense but also functional. This functionality bears or articulates a sense which in so doing also constitutes an inside, a level of organisation which in referring outwards organises itself as a centre of reference for which that relation to an outside has a meaning. As Canguilhern writes: “From the biological and psychological point of view, a sense is an appreciation of values in relation to a need. And for the one who experiences as lives it, a need is an irreducible, and thereby absolute, system of reference” (Canguilhem 1965, p. 154; 2008, p. 120). What Canguilhem’s thinking offers here is an understanding of biological individuality as being constituted in lived, meaningful, or semiotic relations which are, at one and the same time, both self-reflexive (that is, organising the individual as a centre of reference) and a relation to a not-self, an exteriority or outside (the organ in which the cell finds itself, the organism surrounding the organ, the environment surrounding the organ and so on). Where these simultaneously self-reflexive and, one might say, “hetero-referential” relations might be determined by biology as biochemical, physiological, or as behavioural processes, they are always lived by the organism as such in the first person as it were, and either consciously or (mostly) unconsciously as meaningful, and this from the “lowest” form of single-cell life to the highest or most complicated forms of self-awareness and environmental interaction.

So, where Maturana and Varela offer a theory of autopoiesis as organisation according to self-referential closure what we find in Canguilhern is, to redeploy the guiding concept of this discussion, an account of the living organism as heteropoiesis. In the context of this biological philosophy heteropoiesis describes the organisation of a living system according to its relations of reference to its exterior environment, its outside, relations which are meaningful to that system and thereby constitute it as a centre of reference that is nevertheless radically open and devoid of closure at the level of organisation.

The difficulties that Maturana and Varela face in framing the epistemological outcome of autopoietic closure as neither subject-independent and objective representation on the one hand nor as subject-dependent idealism or solipsism on the other evaporate in Canguilhern’s account of the organism and its environment. As the Canguilhem-influenced philosopher and historian of biology Jean Gayon has put it: “in a biological perspective, and more especially in an evolutionary perspective, what matters is not an independent world, but a surrounding world” (Gayon 2004, p. 171). If the individuality of a biological organism is conceived as the product of relations of sense constituted in a passage through its exteriority or outside then the opposition between subject-dependent and subject-independent knowledge and experience is a false one. Our knowledge and experience of the external world are both adjusted to the relations of sense we have with and through exteriority. Knowledge and experience are
not simply reducible to our epistemic dispositions or categories – we encounter the world as real and not as a fiction or as a simple projection of those categories.

This insight is echoed within the realm of contemporary biosemiotics. As Donald Favereau has noted, according to biosemiotic theory and with regard to biological organisms of any kind: “it is precisely the naturalistic establishment of sign relations that bridge subject-dependent experience [...] with the inescapable subject-independent reality of alterity that all organisms have to find some way to successfully perceive and act upon in order to maintain themselves in existence” (Favereau 2008, p. 8).

So biological heteropoiesis, such as it is understood here in relation to Canguilhem, implies an openness and constitutive exposure to an “outside” on the level of the organisation of an organism. It also implies a novel realism on the level of epistemology and in relation to the sense or meaning that organisms produce in relation to their environment. Articulating heteropoiesis on the level of biology opens up the way for a clearer and more precise theoretical understanding of heteropoiesis such as it has been discerned in Quignard’s zoological and naturalistic account of the human, its psychical and symbolic life, and the status of narrative, fiction, and art.

5 Heteropoiesis III: Sketching a Naturalist Theory of Narrative

Arguably, heteropoiesis conceived of, as it is here, on the level of both living organisms and of narrative and the symbolic allows us to think the continuity of meaning production and self-organisation across first-order biological and second-order symbolic systems without any recourse to analogy or metaphor. Quignard’s insistence that narrative is always in relation to an anteriority and an order of sense and meaning which is natural and zoological can now be understood in the context of, or in relation to, the naturalistic sign relations posited by biosemiotics and what one might call the “axiology” of biological life as affirmed in both Canguilhem’s and Gayon’s understanding of the individual organism. So, bringing biological and narrative or symbolic heteropoiesis together would allow one to hypothesise that the sign relations of biological life extend themselves into the sign relations of symbolic and social life. The former is an anteriority and conditioning exteriority with regard to the latter: the symbolic presupposes the biosemiotic as its prior condition and is therefore in a constitutive relation to it. In this way one might hypothesise more broadly that each
and every instance of self-reflexive self-organisation is constituted in relation to a prior outside, an anterior other, and that anterior instance would in turn be constituted in its relation of exposure to a further outside in a successive layering of subsequent relationality. The logic of heteropoiesis here implies that any given biological world is also always semiotic and liable to engender a symbolic world and that any given symbolic world, form, or narrative is also always rooted in a semiotic biological world that, in making sense, thereby makes possible the symbolic, imagistic, and linguistic, systems of meaning and reference that are posterior to it.

As was indicated earlier, Quignard says as much himself when he writes that “fiction plunges back into the zoologically implicit” and notes just prior to this comment that “books plunge their readers into neighbouring worlds; [...] into the precession of sense [...] into a semantisation before signs” (Quignard 2002b, p. 160; my italics). It is by this means, precisely, that he comes to affirm natural heterogeneity as the “destiny of art” (Quignard 2002a, p. 66) and that he can likewise affirm: “There is a way of reading before all writing just as there are signs before all natural language” (Quignard 2002b, p. 167). Similarly, Quignard ascribes the power of the image to a dimension of semiosis and symbolisation that is pre-linguistic and pre-human: “Images are pre-human. They date from before natural languages spoken by human mouths” (Quignard 2002a, p. 105).

It might be worth specifying and clarifying at this point that what is at stake here is not a determinable efficient causality. It is not being suggested that a biologist might be able to determine any given symbolic meaning and objectify it as the causal result of a biosemiotics process. There is no reductivism, scientism, or objectivism at play here and as such heteropoiesis as a concept remains to a degree speculative or heuristic and not, say, strictly scientific. As has been emphasised throughout, the logic of heteropoiesis describes a process whereby self-reflexive organisation or constitution must refer to, or pass by way of, an anterior alterity which is not a cause but a condition of possibility. As such the anterior heterogeneity of sense that heteropoiesis posits is indeterminate for the subject or self that is heteropoietically produced by it. Put more forcefully, it is undeterminable and ungraspably insofar as any instance of lived self-reflexive meaning cannot seize the radical exteriority which for it can only ever also be an absent anteriority.⁷

⁷ Wendy Wheeler’s work has broken significant ground in this area bringing together biosemiotics and symbolic account of meaning drawing diverse figures in process philosophy, the natural theory of signs, and systems theory (for example, Charles Sanders Pierce, Gregory Bateson, Gilles Deleuze, Alfred North Whitehead, Jakob von Uexküll). See Wheeler (2018). However, the
In this context it can be affirmed once more, and in a final iteration, that the biological and zoological “jadis” that Quignard evokes, is definitively not the determined and known past of a chronological or historical sequence. For such a past is that which we ourselves produce from our narratives as they orientate historical time-consciousness itself as and in narrative sequence. Nor is it therefore a past that can be specified within a scientifically determined order of objective biological, evolutionary, and genetic knowledge. For it is an order of sense and meaning that precedes our human meaning and symbolic consciousness as a kind of deep biological past that makes determinate objective knowledge and subjective consciousness possible as such.

This is a past of sense and meaning, material, biological, naturalistic that has above all been subjectively and inter-subjectively, personally and impersonally, consciously and unconsciously lived. As such it precedes and penetrates all present human narrative and narrativity and all human narrative and narrativity relates to it when it produces determinate symbolic meaning, sequence, and (pace Blanchot) the paradoxical presence-absence of all that is narrated.

This is the critical and philosophical frame with which we can begin to understand and approach what I would call Quignard’s post-deconstructive naturalism. It allows his reflections on art and narrative in Dernier royaume and the mosaic assemblage of personal recollection and cultural memory to be understood as an attempt to grasp the impersonal anteriority, nonhuman and human, biological and symbolic, that makes it possible as narration and as narrativity. Yet this anteriority is by definition ungraspable. Therefore, as self-affirming forms of narrative heteropoiesis, Les Ombres errantes, Sur le jadis, and Abîmes produce themselves only in and as a proliferation of fragments without identity, totality, or any possibility of completion.

In this way it might be said that the first three volumes of Dernier royaume form a self-reflexive and performative narrative of the possibility and impossibility of narrative. Insofar as the totality of biological life and therefore also human life is implied or implicated in this performance it becomes clear why the extensive allusions across time and space in their natural and historical dimensions can only be presented in fragmented form. The authorial or narrative consciousness, finite as it is, is lead into an infinite labyrinth of anteriority in a quest to encounter or grasp that which has come before to make it what it is or can be. “Human fiction is destined to the preterite” (Quignard 2002b, p. 162) and Dernier royaume plunges back into its own founding and ungraspable absence producing nothing

logic of heteropoiesis elaborated here difference decisively from that offered by process philosophies or ontologies and is specifically post-deconstructive; again see James (2019).
but scattered shards, images, fragments. It has been argued that this process of narration is, although at times marked by melancholic nostalgia, more generative and productive of narrative as such. Here Quignard performs the essence or destiny of narrative, and of art more generally, not as the nostalgia for a known past, but as the exploration of an infinitely receding past that is encountered at the limits of finite form (consciousness, personality, authorial subjectivity) at the moment of its constitutive exposure to an infinite anterior life. “There is a before the before”, Quignard puts it somewhat gnomically, and continues: “A limit before the limit. A without-limit that the limit itself creates retrospectively” (Quignard 2002b, p. 205).

_Dernier royaume_ can be therefore characterised as a distinctly naturalist writing but only insofar as it emerges or is produced as a heteropoietic exposure on and at this limit. It thereby exposes also the generative impossibility of human consciousness being able to grasp the world of sense and meaning that precedes and produces the human and all its symbolic forms. In this way impossibility can be seen to strike the entirety of our human modes of story-telling and self-narration; literary, certainly, but also the social, political, philosophical, and metaphysical stories that we have told ourselves and can tell ourselves from the point at which we now stand looking into the opaque past and deep history of our imagination, myths, and self-representations as they withdraw and disappear into their non-human origin.

This then is heteropoiesis: biosemiotically and zoologically rooted human narrativity as that with which we are both made and unmade. It is the process in which we emerge as what we are by way of an immemorial _being-what-we-were_ and therefore _are not_, a natural being that is always already outside of itself in the very act of self-creation and self-production.

**Bibliography**


