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PRETTY POLYGLOT: PARROTISATION AS THE DIFFERENCE IN REPETITION

Tessa Laird

Previous page:
Sergio Vega, *Telephones of Paradise*, 2005, installation view,
51st Venice Biennale, 2005; 7 sculptures/telephone cabins,
painted fibreglass mounted on iron plates, 244 x 91 x 122cm each;
courtesy the artist

Although I am ostensibly valorising repetition in this essay, I do have some anxiety about repeating things others may have already said or written, or even of repeating myself.¹ Indeed, I am here something of a parrot, and my understanding of some of the theories that I present is *psittacine* – that is, parrot-like, if we are to believe that parrots repeat human phrases without understanding them. Paul Carter suggests that parrots are motivated by almonds, while he, in researching a book about parrots, was motivated by the talismanic word ‘parrot’, in every database, including that ultimate network of ‘parroterialia’, the world wide web.² As a vegan, I also find almonds quite motivating, and as an academic, find that my best way to ensure a continued supply of almonds is to recite the required words (names of philosophers, for instance). Perhaps we could call this the (pretty) polly-tics of citation?

It is difficult to resist puns when thinking of the parrot. I have called this essay ‘Pretty polyglot’ as a riff on the term of endearment ‘Pretty Polly’ used exclusively with parrots. Why have parrots been called ‘Polly’ (double L) in Anglophone countries since the seventeenth century? No-one seems to know, but it is thought to be a form of Molly, and related to Mary, rather than to the Ancient Greek prefix ‘poly’ (single L) meaning ‘many’. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, as evidenced by both cultural theory and art practice, parrots are emblematic of diversity and proliferation, of difference and repetition, and of the generation of novelty through wilful reiteration.

As we all know, parrots have a propensity for vocal, and even postural, repetition. Schooled or unschooled, they can perform uncanny feats of mimesis, sometimes as accurately as a recording device. To be polyglot is to be able to speak many tongues. The parrot can learn any language, including the languages of other birds and even, occasionally, of bats.³ Perhaps this is why, in some folk beliefs, parrots’ bodies were used ritualistically to endow a human subject with the fabulous ability to speak in foreign tongues. Anthropologist Michael Taussig, whose 1993 book *Mimesis and Alterity* deals precisely with the magic of mimicry and its fascination for the other, uncovers stories from the Panama region of parrots used in magical rites. Those who wished to acquire foreign tongues would either eat parrots, or else the hopeful polyglot would smear the dead bird’s ashes on their tongue: ‘It is the soul of the parrot ... that then does

the teaching, and this occurs in dreams, where the parrot’s soul may appear as a foreign person.’⁴ In our use of sympathetic magic to mimic these feathered masters of mimicry, we are performing a mimetic feedback loop which Taussig gives the heady name ‘the metamorphic sublime’, from which, he says, ‘all manner of being emerges’.⁵ The question of who is mimicking whom is moot, as parrots have been on the scene at least 50 million years prior to us apes.

As Carter puts it, the pre-human, pre-linguistic world was not speechless, but ‘alive with the primary colours of language, clicks, squawks and whistles ... a kind of all-speak’,⁶ while D. H. Lawrence pointed out that, ‘in the beginning it was not a Word, but a chirrup’.⁷ The American surf rock band The Trashmen in their 1963 hit ‘Surfin’ Bird’ declared that ‘bird is the word’,⁸ acknowledging the originary ‘irruption of language in nature’ that introduced difference into the world,⁹ which we can either decry as a loss of unity and subsequent reign of confusion, as with the Christian parable of Babel, or we can celebrate as the moment consciousness was born.

Given the ancient avian origins of language, then, the fact that we presume to teach parrots to speak is an act of mimetic doubling, deflecting attention, like light off a mirror, from the fact that it was they who taught us to speak. One of the most famous examples of *psittacine* linguistic prowess was Alex the African grey parrot, who knew close to 150 human words. He could count objects and separate them into categories; he made jokes and expressed frustration at the repetitive nature of experiments by deliberately giving the wrong answer.¹⁰ Alex was a lab animal; his name, far from being an appellation bestowed on a beloved pet, was an acronym for ‘Avian Language Experiment’. He was bought from a pet shop at the age of one and spent 30 years in captivity before dying a relatively premature death.

When thinking of poor Alex’s life story, I cannot help but be reminded of the classic Monty Python ‘Dead Parrot Sketch’, in which John Cleese as the outraged customer attempts to return the deceased parrot he was sold by a dodgy pet-store owner played by Michael Palin. Cleese intones: ‘This parrot is no more. It has ceased to be. It has expired and gone to meet its maker. This is a late parrot, ... an ex-parrot.’¹¹ While Alex may have been technically alive, he is emblematic of what Jack Halberstam in his recent book *Wild Things* refers to as our ‘zombified

Danie Mellor, *Marri diramu: balam dugurrba*, 2016, mixed media on
Saunders Waterford paper with wash, glitter and Swarovski crystal, 147 x 97cm;
Wollongong Art Gallery, purchased 2016; courtesy the artist



relations' with animals. Halberstam invokes both the 'Dead Parrot Sketch', and its sculptural tribute, to ask whether in fact 'all pets are dead pets' – that is, 'barely living and existing only according to the dictates of a human master'.¹² Equally for Halberstam, it is not only the parrot that is dead, but the humans who insist on controlling and training animals, just as they too are controlled and trained by the capitalist colonialist state. Halberstam considers the 'Dead Parrot Sketch' to be the 'perfect symbol of our time ... in which we are all already late, deceased, ex-humans masquerading as resting, stunned, or momentarily incapacitated'. We have entered a period of what Halberstam calls 'zombie humanism', in which the human only seems alive in contrast to the creatures that exist solely as 'our prosthetic extensions'.¹³

It is no wonder, then, that Alex the parrot plucked himself, a symptom of stress in incarcerated birds. As Carter rather poetically puts it: 'Feathers are letters, and when it becomes plain that no amount of erudition can earn the parrot his freedom, he grows melancholy. He refuses to speak; he tears off his armature of feathery phrases, and stands naked and trembling.'¹⁴ The naked trembling Alex reflects our own carceral realities back at us (more apt than ever in this endless cycle of lockdowns). We need to move beyond being transfixed by our own reflections in the psittacine mirror by listening differently to our feathered kin, imagining communication, Carter says, as 'a net' or an 'open web', rather than a cage or other 'technique of enslavement'.¹⁵ Only then will the Eden from whence the parrots came reveal itself.

So how do we listen differently? To avoid zombified relations, we must first understand the mimetic faculty – not as mindless repetition but, rather, as Taussig puts it, as 'the nature that uses culture to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other'.¹⁶ Taussig enjoys this heady repetition, and notes that he is doing it too, writing of the Cuna Indians whose chants involve a series of quotations within quotations, while he (Taussig) is quoting another anthropologist on this subject, while I am now quoting Taussig, and so on, ad infinitum, 'doubling mimetic doubling' as he puts it.¹⁷ Truly, these are copies without an original, as Jean Baudrillard would have it, but who was only ever parroting what the parrots were telling us all along. Baudrillard's 'precession of simulacra', in which the copy precedes the original,¹⁸

is an idea which similarly precedes Baudrillard and can be found in Gilles Deleuze paraphrasing Charles Péguy to the effect that 'it is not Federation Day which commemorates or represents the fall of the Bastille, but the fall of the Bastille which celebrates and repeats in advance all the Federation Days; or Monet's first water lily which repeats all the others'.¹⁹ Parroting Henri Bergson, Deleuze says that the past is in fact a repetition of the present.²⁰

In her discussion of repetition in the literature of Gertrude Stein, Astrid Lorange writes that: 'Being insistently and with deviation is becoming: an emergent ontology.'²¹ Stein's singularity as a writer is most often attributed to her fearlessness regarding verbal repetition. But Lorange argues that for Stein, repetition cannot exist, 'for in the act of repeating, the thing repeated is never the same – its "emphasis" will always and necessarily be different. Thus "repetition" is a kind of *insistence* and continuous repeating is the minimal modality of differentiation.'²² Stein's investment in repetition-as-difference chimes with Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1968), which argues for repetition 'as the principal agent of change', in which 'variations (in form, intensity, volume, mood, and so on) are registered' in a process by which they become other.²³ Stein invokes the figure of a bird singing as 'the nearest thing to repetition' but, she says, if you listen 'they too vary their insistence'.²⁴ No matter how many times a thing happens, Stein suggests, there is 'no repetition' as such, and she relates this to 'what William James calls the Will to Live' without which 'nobody would live'.²⁵

Alex must have lost his will to live, because when asked the difference between two objects which appeared the same, he said 'none', which was the desired answer, and led to a nutty reward. But deep down he must have known that there was no such thing as repetition, and that a world of difference exists between two plastic cups. He was an existential parrot. Gazing into a mirror one day, he asked 'what colour?', and learnt that he was 'grey' after being told six times.²⁶ Goethe equated theory with the colour grey,²⁷ and Alex was just that, a theorem, not an animal (which is exactly what Jacques Derrida warned against in abstract philosophising about 'the animal').²⁸ Alex died of a broken heart – realising that he was nothing but a grey mirror held up to humanity.

We give parrots mirrors to play with, laughing at their seeming simplicity as they peck at their

Glenn Barkley, *before the first far flash*, 2021, earthenware, 59 x 33 x 37cm; courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney and Singapore; photo: Simon Hewson



imaginary adversaries, or utter endearments to their reflected selves. In these base acts of paranoia and narcissism, however, the parrot mirrors none other than the human. For Taussig, the mimesis of mirroring is 'unsettled and unsettling interpretation in constant movement with itself' in which the 'self enters into the alter against which the self is defined and sustained'.²⁹ He describes this as 'a kind of electricity, an ac/dc pattern of rapid oscillations of difference', where, pushed to the limit, mimesis itself becomes alterity. 'Then and only then,' says Taussig, 'can spirit and matter, history and nature, flow into each others' otherness'.³⁰

Unlike Jacques Lacan's mirror stage which indicates the emergence of a properly individuated human ego, the parrot's mirror is a window into a world of alterity, such as the one Alice passes into in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), which Deleuze devotes serious attention to in *The*

Logic of Sense (1969). According to Deleuze, we need to step through to the other side in order to appreciate the dynamism and complexity of the world.³¹ On this side of the mirror, there is no simple opposition between being and becoming, change and stasis. What appears to stay the same must be understood in a radically differential fashion, like Stein's (or any self-respecting parrot's) repetition of choice phrases.

Imagining the world through the looking glass might be a little like imagining the world through parrot vision. Not only would we see more colours, but a more-or-less 360-degree view. Released from our current 'perspectival cage', as Carter would have it, we would witness a world 'without centre or edge'.³² He also suggests that since parrots can see one side of themselves with one eye, and the other side with the other eye, they have no single unified image of themselves, no concept of possessing a single iden-

city.³³ Parrots are social creatures who enjoy repeating what they hear. Identity is never fixed, and subjectivity a diffractive affair.

Argentinian artist Sergio Vega sees the parrot as being an appropriate emblem or totem of the twenty-first century. Vega's 1999 'Telephones of Paradise' series comprises photo documents of Brazilian public payphones fashioned as giant parrots. Six years later, he made copies of these phones for the 2005 Venice Biennale. Attached by the umbilical phone cord, people parrot their feathered doubles, sending squawks and shrieks across the world. Vega's manifesto 'Parrot Theory' declares that 'the days of the hierarchical and lonely eagle are over', and the era of the parrot has begun (I like to think of this as an era of greater parity, which is, of course, homophonous with *parrot*). Vega compares parrots to 'flocks of immigrants from the warm regions of the world' who bring with them spices and colours; they are communal and communicative, and 'have a great propensity to learn from others'.³⁴

In Vega's century of the parrot, information technology has created a 'parrotisation of culture': not so much the banal chatter, or indeed twitter, of certain social media platforms but, rather, a kind of information sharing and cultural commons. We might compare this to Denise Ferreira da Silva's 'difference without separability',³⁵ a gathering of rainbow alliances which Vega visions as 'the rise of a global, postcolonial avant-garde forever changing the world into words, mirrors, and colours, as we speak ...'³⁶

Repeating Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Erin Manning says, we do not need to ask: 'Relation between what and what?' Rather, Manning emphasises, '[d]iversity is in diversity, not in opposition to a norm'.³⁷ And, as Gertrude Stein writes in *Tender Buttons* (1914), echoing the movement of Vega's flocks of psittacine immigrants: 'The difference is spreading'.³⁸

1. Some of these thoughts on parrots first found their way into the 'Green' chapter of my book on colour: *A Rainbow Reader*, Clouds, Auckland, 2013.
2. See Paul Carter, *Parrot*, Reaktion Books, London, 2005.
3. Eva Meijer, *Animal Languages*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2019, p. 21.
4. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, Routledge, New York, 1993, pp. 134–5.
5. Michael Taussig, *Palma Africana*, University of Chicago Press, 2018, p. 1.
6. Carter, op. cit., pp. 110–11.
7. D. H. Lawrence, *Etruscan Places*, William Heinemann, London, 1932, p. 57.
8. My italics.

9. Peter Lamborn Wilson, 'Green hermeticism', in Christopher Bamford (ed.), *Green Hermeticism: Alchemy and Ecology*, Lindisfarne Books, Great Barrington, Mass., 2007, p. 58.
10. 'Alex showed surprise and anger when confronted with a nonexistent object or one different from what he had been led to believe was hidden during the tests.' See Steven M. Wise, *Drawing the Line*, Perseus Books, Cambridge, Mass., 2002, pp. 101–2.
11. Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2020, pp. 115–6.
12. *ibid.*, p. 162.
13. *ibid.*, p. 116.
14. Carter, op. cit., p. 99.
15. *ibid.*, p. 8.
16. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, op. cit., p. xiii.
17. *ibid.*, pp. 109–110.
18. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1994.
19. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p. 1.
20. Jon Roffe, *The Works of Gilles Deleuze I: 1953–1969*, re.press, Melbourne, 2020, p. 224.
21. Astrid Lorange, *How Reading is Written: A Brief Index to Gertrude Stein*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Conn., 2014, p. 19. My italics.
22. *ibid.*, p. 206 (italics in the original).
23. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 207.
24. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 209.
25. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 206–8.
26. Wise, op. cit., p. 107.
27. Quoted in David Batchelor, *The Luminous and the Grey*, Reaktion Books, London, 2014, p. 69.
28. Jacques Derrida, 'The animal that therefore I am (more to follow)', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 2, Winter 2002, p. 383.
29. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, op. cit., p. 237.
30. *ibid.*, p. 192.
31. Roffe, op. cit., p. 252.
32. Carter, op. cit., p. 157.
33. *ibid.*, p. 156.
34. Sergio Vega, 'Parrot Theory 101', 7 March 2009, see: sergio-vega-art.squarespace.com/columbia-university-paris, accessed 8 October 2021.
35. Denise Ferreira da Silva, 'On difference without separability', *32nd Bienal de São Paulo: Incerteza Viva*, exhibition catalogue, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016, pp. 57–65.
36. Vega, op. cit.
37. Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2020, p. 49.
38. Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*, Claire Marie, New York, 1914, p. 3.

This essay was originally presented as a paper for the 'Birds and Language' conference at the University of Sydney's School of Literature, Art and Media on 20 August 2021 to accompany the exhibition of the same name, curated by Madeleine Kelly, at Wollongong Art Gallery, currently on display until 13 February 2022.

Sergio Vega, *Telephones of Paradise*, 1999, 11 photographs and text panels, 35.5 x 27.9cm each; courtesy the artist and Galerie Karsten Greve, Paris, Köln and St Moritz; © Sergio Vega

