parrot interpreter

Representation, Extinction and the Electronic Information Environment

PAUL CARTER

— Parrot: an imaginary history

I have been writing a book called *Parrot*.[1] There are books about the natural history of parrots. These cover the geographical distribution of the parrot family (estimated at about 350 species), their physical appearance and behaviour. They also describe the extinction or impending extinction of many parrot types because of the illegal bird trade, the feather trade and a variety of environmentally destructive industrial practices. There are cultural histories of parrots. These describe the roles parrots have played in various human cultures, as entertainers, companions, pranksters, go-betweens and naive philosophers. They also expatiate on the commercial exploitation of parrots, their threatened status in the wild and the apparently universal narcissism of our interest in them.

It's odd when you juxtapose these two kinds of history: in the first is documented a resistlessly destructive will to extinguish the other, carried on through various channels—those I have mentioned, but also including the scientific enterprise represented by collecting, classification and captivity. In the second, though, you are confronted with an equally boundless amorousness. Humans, it seems, can't get enough of parrots. Ethnography, folklore, psychology, and, of course, imaginative literature all offer copious evidence of our fantasy of living with, communicating with and even being parrots. Caged-bird societies abound, and so do parrot psychologists who specialise in educating the parrot (and his human enslaver) for his role as pet. Aviculturalists go a step further, breeding the types we apparently need, a process that is as inventive nominally as it is chromatically—and to think that for

every budgie mutation there is a new society formed—the White-bellied Blue, the Lutino, the Pearled and the Pearl-Pied.

These two literatures present something of a conundrum: on the one hand, a massive destructiveness; on the other, an often erotically inflected sympathetic identification leading to the production of new forms (discursively as well as biologically—there existed in ninth century China, for example, a poetic genre known as the 'parrot-answer' poem).[2] Of course, it's easy to see how the ends of this axis stretched between hatred and love bend back and meet. It's strange to realise that Europe is infested with a shadow population of captive and inbred budgerigars, whose numbers far exceed those remaining in the wild; and, further, that this shadow population can never return to its origins, for the avian alchemy practised by aviculture produces a constantly evolving artificial parrot family that can never interact with its wild congeners. So, it's true that we love parrots to death, yet even this fact preserves the contradiction I am trying to define. If, as our privileged other, our uncanny mimic and double, parrot still fails to survive, what does this tell us about our economy of desire? It seems that to know is to consume and destroy; and that the apparent contrast between the operations of the rainforest loggers and bird-trappers and the sentimental representations and transformations parrot suffers in human society is overdrawn.

How is this contradiction to be explained? How is it that parrot multiplies in the human imaginary in inverse proportion to its abundance and diversity in the wild? And is the logical outcome of this inverse proportion that we will not wholly possess parrot until she is entirely extinct? It is unlikely that two species of human being exist; one hating parrots, the other loving them. The permutations of desire are endless. The Bororo people of Amazonia, whose parrot-identification is a notorious *locus classicus* of ethnographic discussion, are not in the least sentimental about the suffering they cause their avian others: they strip them of their magnificent feathers and tether them naked to scaffolds.[3] As for the avian psychologists, much as they wish to lower the parrot's 'misery index', they baulk at the notion of free flight. If, one psychologist advises, Polly is allowed to grow back her flight feathers, make sure that she is trained to fly only to her mistress,[4] a nice variant on Hegel's master–slave thesis.

In other words, it's my impression that the conflict we feel over parrots is unlikely to be resolved in the realm of individual or collective psychology; nor can a material history quite account for the excessive importance parrots have in our symbolic life. I would agree with Joseph Roach that the role parrots play in, say, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European theatre, painting and fashion conforms to Georges Bataille's description of imperial economy as one of superabundance and conspicuous waste.[5] Parrots migrate widely through the human imaginary because they are useless. Or, more exactly, they are productive because no one particular meaning (or use) can be assigned to them. In this sense they live up to their pun. Polly by name, poly or many by nature. Parrot is polysemous, that is many-signifying.

Obviously, Polly's polysemousness stems from parrot's ability to talk. What I said about parrot's natural history applies equally to other non-speaking species; indeed, as far as environmentally unsustainable industrial practices go, the fate of parrot is a microcosm of the fate of the natural world as a whole. And, indeed, and perhaps more surprisingly, even cultural histories of parrot don't really understand the significance of parrot's mimetic powers. Of course, they are replete with parrot jokes, parrot detectives, parrot witnesses and other manifestations of parrot as parroter, but their accounts are as it were culturally deterministic. It is not allowed that, in talking back and never quite saying what is said to it, parrot does not simply represent us to ourselves but actually (in some societies) and symbolically in ours initiates us into the mystery of communication. In other words, parrot occupies a distinctive niche in our collective imaginary; because of its powers of speech in particular, and its mimetic genius generally, it is a Janus creature guarding the gateway between nature and culture.

Parrot, as I said, never simply talks back. It's surprising to find that parrots do not display a mimetic aptitude in the wild. They only start to mimic in captivity. This, I take it, reflects the conditions of communication in the human cage as well. We are interpellated from the beginning; and perhaps, if we would only realise this, it would be no bad thing. In Jalaluddin Rumi's great poem, *Tuti va Bazargan* ('The Parrot and the Merchant'), the merchant ego desires the parrot to take it out of itself. But the *tuti* explains:

> I am an echo of yourself which you have caged. I have no other song to sing but songs of being caged to sing you songs of your old tired self that longs to hear some other song but can't because you have that key around your neck to keep me caged so I will sing the sweet sad song of your old tired self that can't escape your self because you cage your self and are afraid if you release the echo bird you'll lose yourself.[6]

The *tuti*'s 'sweet sad lyric voice' is not his own. And when by a ruse he gains his freedom, he lapses into silence.

This text, too, I take it, is an allegory about representation. Talkativeness is a kind of captivity and death. At the same time talk-talk, which the parrot symbolises—that excess of chatter for which 'society' is famous—is also a critical mirror in which we can register the limitations of our communicational paradigm, with its privileging of univocal signs over polyvocal symbols. Michel Serres has an essay about Hergé's Tintin adventure *The Castafiore Emerald* in which he argues that the parrot embodies the general truth of the tale; for in this tale in which, some will remember, nothing happens, it is, as Serres puts it, communication which is the real thief, for it is the 'noise' that the channels of communication create that prevents the characters (and us) from finding the truth. Serres finds the entire cartoon is mimetically structured—everything imitates everything else. 'At the source anything (or almost) can be emitted, everything will be scrambled at reception … Who's speaking? Who's

answering … The phone rings. Bartock answers: hello, I can hear you. At the same time, Coco [the parrot] repeats it …' The result of such antics is 'a final victory to noise'.[7]

The parrot prompts speech, but it also renders communication impossible. Materialising the conditions of communication, it shows that the medium is the message. This contradictory character is perhaps contained in the name Coco: evidently the parrot can repeat itself, that is, prompt further sound and amplify the original syllable, but it leads nowhere or, if anything, tends to an intensified solipsism. The echo of cockatoo is convenient. More subversive is the echo of Coco Chanel, the diva of fashion. In the fashion world, as in the world of media, the semblance of something happening, the appearance of desire, is everything.

This it seems to me is the salient attribute of parrot, that it materialises the nature, limits and conditions of communication. This is my first point, and it follows that neither a cultural history nor a natural history can fully articulate the global implications of a better parrot understanding. To do this it's necessary to follow the vicissitudes of parrot in a different environment, one that overlaps geography and history but which is distinct from either. And it's to this end that I am privately subtitling *Parrot* 'an imaginary history'. An imaginary history would not be entirely fanciful even if it only documented the fantasies that have accrued around parrots. But such a history, listing, say Nazca geoglyphs, the intimate décor of Parrot Pouches, the naming of products and their advertising, would simply be a unit in any cultural history. It would be a history of parrots in the imagination, comparable, say, to a chapter on parrots in the economy, or in art. But an imaginary history implies something more active, the way in which parrot stands for the act of imaginative projection, and because of this can inform us not only about our narcissism, but about the tenuousness of our grasp on the external world, in whose future our own is mimicked.

Arjun Appadurai writes, 'The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms which direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as social work'. Imagination is no longer fantasy, pastime or contemplation (with their implication of withdrawal from social and political reality): 'it has become an organised field of social practices […] and a form of negotiation between sites of agency ('individuals') and globally defined fields of possibility'.[8] An imaginary history of parrots is, then, hardly fanciful. It is an account of parrots considered globally, as parrots circulate in a symbolic economy in which the exchange rate, and hence the rate of change, of different signs is constantly being renegotiated. To study imaginary parrots is not to withdraw from the painful realities of habitat destruction, the illegal bird trade, or the hardly less exploitative emotional economy of aviculturalists and caged-bird enthusiasts. It is to expose the mechanisms that produce the paradox of loving what we love to death. And I would suggest that the sustainable future of parrots, their habitats and the world they subtend will not be up to the conservationists alone. We also will decide it by understanding better *l'imaginaire*, the 'constructed

landscape of our collected representations'. Only then can we—readers, individuals—be 'sites of agency' able to negotiate the possibility of a biodiverse, sustainable future.

— Parrot interpreter: the electronic imaginary

There is—to continue with our distinction—a natural parrot ecology; there is also a cultural parrot ecology. But there is also another, overarching parrot ecology, describing the niches parrot occupies in the constructed landscape of collective representations. How is this latter ecology to be described, and what is its relationship with living birds, biodiverse habitats, with zoo collections, museums or the avicultural and caged-bird community? How, that is, does knowing more about the place of parrot in the global imaginary increase our agency to free it (and, I would say, ourselves) for the future?

First, though, before taking up these questions, I might say something about the notion of ecology, and its limitations as a way of thinking about parrots and the kind of world view a study of parrots produces. I have already mentioned the salient feature of parrots, that they define themselves by what they are not. Of course, this mimetic propensity has its counterpart in the natural phenomenon of mimicry. But, as I said, parrots are not mimetic in the wild.[9] The point I am getting at is that parrots show a capacity to be where they are not. They are parasites in a polysemous way. Rather than occupy strict biological niches, parrots have shown both historically and geographically a remarkable gift for travelling, improvising new behaviours and adopting new forms. It's one of the paradoxes of the burgeoning dialogue between scientists and aviculturalists that, although intended to pool information (primarily about breeding patterns) that will be useful in managing the return of captive populations to the wild, it reveals instead the adaptability of parrots in captivity, the lack of nostalgia (if you like) which parrots exhibit for their old niches in nature.

This uncertainty about where parrots belong has a long history. John Latham, writing in 1776, puzzled over the fact that, 'the [parrot] genus consists of infinite variety … yet they seem to run vastly into one another, so as to induce one to think many of them related though received from different parts of the world'. Not having an evolutionary model at hand to account for the apparently global distribution of a parrot family, he offered an alternative explanation:

> we may be deceived, as they are perpetually carried from one continent to another for the sake of sale. This uncertainty of native place must prevent us following the otherwise judicious plan of *Buffon*, of ranging them according to the places they are supposed to inhabit.[10]

Actually, Comte de Buffon's plan was subtler and more eccentric. Buffon didn't believe in species and, without taking sides on this question, one can admit that his conception of

nature as 'an unbroken continuum or horizontal web (*réseau*) of inter-related beings whose connections could be described but never fixed in time, and where certain species acted as transitional categories or connectors between other larger—and more stable—categories of being' has a presciently ecological ring to it.[11]

As for his eccentricity: Buffon first separated the parrots of the Old World from the parrots of the New, but his reasoning was marginally scientific. He subdivided these large families 'somewhat in accordance with the names they had received in popular language'.[12] This provokes an odd thought. Popular names tended to be imitative; even the parrot names explorers got from the natives generally reproduced the calls of the birds themselves. Could it be that parrot taxonomy originated in families of sounds orchestrated by parrots?

In any case these anecdotes suggest that parrots were recognised early on as presenting a special case. The scientific illusion of discovering a new phenomenon of nature could not be sustained in the case of parrots. They had been traded from the earliest days of long-distance travel and navigation. As Errol Fuller, author of a book called *Extinct Birds*, points out, when a seventeenth-century traveller reported seeing a blue-and-yellow macaw on an island outside its known range, it was more likely to be an escaped cage bird than a new species or subspecies.[13] Equally, their afterlife in captivity has been characterised by extreme mobility, repeated sensory deprivation, brainwashing and re-education. There no longer exists, if there ever did, a parrot population outside the global *réseau* of human desire. Parrots were never observed detachedly: from the moment they flew into the human optic, they were objects of desire, consumed, burnt to ashes and revivified Phoenix-like in libraries of illustration, in zoological collections and taxidermists' drawers. Hence, any ecological account adequate to a global description of the habitats parrots live in, and the relations they enjoy with other living things, will have to be couched in terms of media rather than places, in terms of passageways and clines of transformation, rather than in terms of notions of closed community and self-replicating homogeneous systems.

But to return to our questions. To suggest that *Parrot* emerged simply from a sober reflection on the inadequacy of earlier books about parrots would be to flatter my originality, even if such claims are the stuff of government-addressed grant applications. The necessity of an imaginary, as opposed to a natural or cultural, history of parrots impressed itself upon me because of the nature of my research tools. The very term 'parrot', and the commission to write a book with this title, was, of course, an invitation to explore the polysemous fertility of what's in a name. But my power to do this in a pre-Internet environment of communication would have been relatively limited. This is partly because a traditional library-based mode of research is, as it were, vertically organised, and partly because—it's my impression at least—parrots rarely occupy centre-stage in those topics where they are mentioned.

The vertical nature of pre-electronic research partly explains why one cultural history after another parrots, as it were, the historical allusions, cultural commonplaces and literary and artistic appearances found in earlier books. It is an extremely time-wasting business speed-reading through a hundred poets, or flicking through an equal number of images of paintings, especially when such resources are not indexed in a way that would disclose their concealed parrot lore. The marginal or walk-on parts that parrots play in most literatures, scientific and non-scientific, adds to the problem of recovery. This is not to say that, in the ecology of representation, parrots are rare. On the contrary, they are common. But they are hard to see and grasp. A myriad of caged parrots feature in the poems written by similarly caged women in T'ang Dynasty China, but hardly a single poem can be said to be 'about' a parrot. I have come to the conclusion that parrots are the secret chromatic and perhaps aesthetic sharer in a number of artists, in whose work they do not obviously appear, although their ubiquitous presence is implied: Jackson Pollock, Max Jacob, Piet Mondrian, Joan Miró and Asger Jorn, for example.

In other words, the invitation to write about 'parrot' was an also an invitation to behave like a parrot. As parrots are supposed to pick up whatever they hear, making a parrot discourse composed of otherwise unrelated sounds and utterances, so with my book: it would be governed by no other guiding principle than that of the name. Thomas Nashe and the Elizabethans fancied almonds were needed to motivate parrots: my 'almonds' have been 'parrots', the word, where it occurred in subject indexes, Internet searches, online picture libraries. Like the parrot, mimicking what it hears without rhyme or reason, I collected parrot references on a principle of repetition or likeness. Like the parrot juggling its overheard phrases to comic effect, the result of collecting together what lies scattered across cultures, centuries and continents has been a mosaic of the human mind at once amusing and disturbing. It's an imaginary picture of how we have imagined the world. It copies the mimetic habits of the parrot—which always go a little beyond what they echo, producing an absurdity that seems uncannily true.

But, to come to the point, the fact that I *could* proceed in this way reflected the nature of contemporary information organisation and retrieval. Nearly gone are the days when data, as I say, was organised locally, thematically and genealogically. In the pre-electronic library only an exceptionally zealous parrotologist would have located both a Jataka story about parrots and an article (published in a professional journal of psychology) on right- and left-footedness in parrots. It's hard to imagine even a compiler of instances as zealous as Richard Burton or Michel de Montaigne finding in his imaginary library both a discourse of popinjays and a collection of Jewish parrot jokes from Australia. But now (in a day as it were) a cosmos of inscrutable hearsay, anecdote, opinion—with nothing else in common than its susceptibility

to recovery via the talismanic name 'parrot'—can be gathered: Mozart's Papageno as the first modern account of Down syndrome, the prehensile feats of the Trained Parrot Circus, the fate of the nestling yellow-winged amazons being traded in the Argentinean province of Chaco, and a painting by George Morland (*The Disconsolate and her Parrot*).

In other words, the universe of parrot associations retrievable through google.com is not simply a powerful extension of previous, traditional research tools and materials. It is a fundamental reconfiguration of information, and hence an equally fundamental redefinition of what constitutes knowledge. In terms of informatics, it is a return to the pre-Linnaean hypothesis of Buffon, that the relations between the parts of nature—or, in this case, the signs of our communicational system—are organised like a multiple interconnected net, rather than being organised species-wise after the fashion of a library. And my further suggestion is that this development is not novel. It is rather a return of the parrot repressed in the collective imaginary prior to the advent of this technology. For just as the old parrot circulated in the collective imaginary as a sign of nonsense, noise, the multiple rather than the one, the confusingly polymorphic as opposed to the substantial and the unified, so with the 'knowledge' yielded by the web—its promiscuous connection of anything to anything collapses into noise. Navigating the web with the talismanic 'parrot + another term' as one's constantly changing lodestar rapidly brings in view an omniscience so superficial that its name is really ignorance.

Now, I acknowledge the claim that the net is parrot-like needs to be tested. What happens if another term is substituted for parrot and the same second term keyed in? I think the answer is from my googlings reasonably clear: 'parrot' is unusually well connected, and in this sense like the net itself. But let me emphasise: the difference of the web from the library is not, in my view, quantitative but qualitative. One reviewer of my self-confessedly impressionistic claims, while acknowledging that the web made larger amounts of data more easily available, denied that the *kind* of information yielded in this way differed from what might be located in a library, always granting an indefatigable researcher. But I am inclined to disagree, as my point is that the apparently inexhaustible, and generally trivial, parrot references found on the web are largely what any traditional indexing system would exclude—precisely because they would be deemed to be trivial, ancillary to the subject in hand.

What the web does, like the parrot, is to collect signs indiscriminately, regardless of whether they signify or not. Whether or not this is persuasive, I take encouragement for my view from the fact that web designers and others themselves seem to see a resemblance—parrots figure prominently in the heraldic language of artificial intelligence, software programming ('Parrot Interpreter' is the name of one such program) and various branches of intelligent programming, in which the repetition and manipulation of complex sequences is the key to releasing ever-widening 'cascades' of instructions. 'Parrot' in these cybernetic domains is associated

with the architecture of the system rather than with its content. Parrot, like the phoneme in structuralist linguistic theory, is the in-itself meaningless unit of communication, that becomes meaningful precisely because its lack of meaning means that it can be connected in a myriad of ways without any loss of identity.

An imaginary history of parrots is inter alia an ecological account of the net. The value of this is that it illuminates a system of information storage, circulation and retrieval that is not organised ecologically, that is, according to the notion of a proper topos for every topic—a notion whose analogue in the field of parrot systematics is the family tree beginning with archaeopteryx and evolving to the present day's 350-odd species.[14] If this analogy is accepted —that there is a structural resemblance between the polysemous fertility of parrot as it circulates in human culture and the architecture of the web, with its capacity to generate almost infinite connections without any regard for what might be called the traditional ecology of parrot-associated facts—what are the implications for parrot understanding? I think it is this: grasping the 'parrot-like' nature of contemporary electronic data organisation does not throw light on parrot nature. What it does do is help explain how the two worlds I described before can coexist—the natural history of destruction and extinction, and the cultural history of reproduction, multiplication and transformation. For, in effect, the electronic imaginary, as we might call the web's constructed landscape of our collected representations, offers the consolation of a parallel world, one in which sign speaks to sign, producing without work new combinations, mutations and metaphors, and thence a ramifying discourse, or parrot knowledge, that proliferates in the absence of any external referent. It's a web consciousness, for example, that allows a couple of New York installation artists to undertake to recover a lost Amazonian language by rehearsing Humboldt's famous story, and interrogating local parrots.[15] This, it seems to me, is a fantasy generated by a culture in which signs are everything, and the survival (or existence) of what they represent has yielded to aesthetics, the pleasing internal arrangement of signs.

The web is the digital equivalent of the avicultural fantasy of breeding new species out of old. The web is Lamarckian, engendering through a single act of nominal cross-fertilisation a new 'site' or locus of parrot meaning. Nothing is gradual here; as in Buffon's *réseau*, access to the most distant associations is instant. Indeed, the notion of geographical distance or historical time is irrelevant. Here everything is the same because everything connects. The web reinstitutes a kind of flat-earth conception of the world we inhabit. The effect of this is phantasmagoric in Walter Benjamin's sense; a spectacle is offered that, while internally electrifying and mesmerising, fails to open onto the historical space and time of mortality. In a time of actual environmental loss, the networking ability of the web mimics a natural fecundity immune from destruction. The key to this, of course, is the substitution of signs not for things but for symbols, the substitution of reductively imagined signifiers (the word

parrot, say) for complexly constituted, polymorphic symbols. It is the dematerialisation of parrots—the same ideological force at work in the destruction of sensitive habitat—that informs their increasingly various and powerful placing throughout the web's economy of signs.

In a parrot context, it may well be that the imperative to digitise information and information flow can be traced back to Linnaeus, and the idea that the parts of nature could be adequately represented by a cluster of uniquely differentiating names. In any case Linnaean taxonomy demanded a new way of looking and a new kind of subject. To constitute types or species, parrots, for example, had to possess a typical look. It followed that a system of classification based on external features needed to represent animals and plants typically. In the case of parrots, their polymorphism had to be repressed. At the same time, the extraordinary chromatic complexity of their plumage meant that they had (at least in the artist's representation) to be contorted into attitudes that would maximise their exposure.[16] The poignancy of Edward Lear's unsurpassed parrot paintings undoubtedly stems from the new conditions of observation, which Linnaean taxonomy imposed upon the scientific illustrator. The prismatic brilliance of the macaw's plumage, the hyper-real reproduction of individual feathers and their lay together communicates a profound anxiety. The distance opened up between artist and subject in the interests of objectivity breeds a longing for closeness, a companionable intimacy in which the 'glare' has not yet been taken off nature. Breaking up the older family, science had created an avian orphanage. Lear wrote not only *for* children but *of* his children, when he versified: 'P was a polly/All red and blue and green/The most beautiful polly/That ever was seen./P! Poor little Polly.'[17]

By the early nineteenth century the nexus between discovery and extinction was becoming clear. The medium of this strangely destructive turn of events was, of course, representation. It was the scientific identification of knowledge with representation that meant that a parrot was no sooner seen than it was in risk of becoming a threatened species. John Audubon's descriptions of his mass slaughter of (the now extinct) Carolina Parakeet in the interests of obtaining specimens he could paint,[18] the still-astonishing avidity of the feather trade (and the elimination of entire avian populations as a result) seem to belong to what might almost be called in regard to living things a kind of collective Schadenfreude; as if the idea of anything living outside the grid of consumption and death produced a kind of resentment and insecurity, an anxiety that the boundlessness of capitalist wealth was in some sense bounded. But the destructive nature of parrot knowledge wasn't confined to the realms of visual and sartorial commerce. It also haunted the groves of strict systematics, for it is a deadly paradox of classificatory science that it achieves its greatest accuracy when the type specimen is the only instance of the thing in question.

As uniqueness is not a property of living things, the next best condition is extinction, in which the former traces of multiplicity and hence variation have effectively been eliminated. It's my impression that this argument also extends to illustrations of parrots. Few representations of living parrots can compare with the opulence (and authority) of paintings of those that are lost, have never been observed alive or which are drawn from hearsay. The most beautiful parrots are extinct. Over time images of living parrots change. Further specimens or captive birds become available. The early, sometimes crude representations are superceded. Sometimes an original portrait is not surpassed, but the proliferation of later versions obscures its power, and the iconic force of the bird in the collective mind grows blurred and variable. Extinct parrots do not suffer this eidetic mutation and visual dilution. They undergo no iconographic development or stylistic variation. The type specimen and the portrait of the soon-to-be-extinct bird are unique. The first painting to preserve its paradise of colour is the last. Because they die out too quickly to be reproduced again, they never experience the conundrum of becoming many. Their beauty never grows relative. In extinction, the parrot, and the idea of the parrot, are fused forever. This is why extinct parrots are most beautiful: they are one with their Platonic form. Their historical appearance coincided with the revelation of an ideal beauty time had no chance to wither or dull.

The portraits of extinct parrots commemorate the paradox of discovery. Extinction is not discovery's accidental, tragic endgame. It resolves the crisis of discovery itself, where finding is dialectically twinned with loss. Discovery laboriously hauls hidden things to the light. But what is to hold them there, blinking in the clearing of reason? Too unreliable to release, they must be killed, skinned and painted if they are to stay. The parrot's portrait represents the crisis of discovery. *Reproduction* signifies crisis—if there were no fear of loss, if the parrots' passing in and out of sight stitching the environment's visual quilt aroused no anxiety, there would be no rush to extract them from the flux, fixing them with images. A recent newspaper report about threatened species was curiously entitled 'Extinct Crisis'. Presumably 'Extinction' was meant. But perhaps not: when a species of parrot dies out, it is, from science's point of view, a *crisis* that has become extinct. For the dread of loss which has haunted it ever since the bird was discovered is at last extinguished.

This excursus into the history of parrot representation is meant to suggest that the development of scientific nomenclature and art initiated the semiotic reduction of polyvalent nature that is also integral to the conception, design and operation of the web. Common to both is a conviction that a self-made or ersatz economy (composed of signs) is an adequate substitute for the web of relations characterising the living world. Perhaps this would be less disastrous if we were not half in love with death ourselves; I mean if we were not so susceptible to the allure of metaphor, allowing imagined, or longed-for associations to override the

rights and resistances of differently constituted individuals, assemblages and their local environments. It is this ideational promiscuity, this capitalistically encouraged preference for easily engineered novelties which makes the scientific reduction of living systems to sign systems so powerfully disastrous a development. The web answers to a kind of intellectual polyamory that weakens our capacity to achieve a parrot understanding—where this phrase not only refers to a better understanding of parrots but to a different understanding of understanding, one informed by the parrot's place in the present global information economy.

— Parrotology: signs back to symbols

Understanding something about the parrot-like nature of the web enables us to see the nexus between those apparently opposite histories of parrot. Extinction and invention apparently go in hand. Signs, it seems, are without conscience. Like viruses, they spread where they can without regard for the health of the living body. But my impression from writing *Parrot* is that the apparent homology between parrot nature and the nature of the web is apparent only. The mimetic *folie à deux* which seems to place parrot in a particularly vulnerable position in the contemporary knowledge economy depends on subscribing to an impoverished notion of parrot nature. The key misrepresentation occurs in the matter of mimicry itself, the assumption that parrots only parrot back what is said to them, and that their performances are, albeit unreliable, mechanical and meaningless. In reality, what they access and represent precisely is that organised field of social practices Appadurai describes, with its network of sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility, which, in a simpler world, we would denominate as 'society'.[19] Parrots alert us to a form of communication mediated by symbols rather than signs—to invoke Paul Ricoeur's distinction:

> all symbols have a sign element within them while signs are not symbols. Signs find their primary identification in their one dimensional conceptually clear identity being transparencies which strive for univocal meaning with singular intention. In contrast to the sign, the symbol is composed of polar dimensions to be identified not by univocity but by double intentionality.

Hence the language of the symbol is 'multivalent'.[20]

This understanding of parrot is beautifully elicited by anthropologist-shaman Martin Prechtel in a book about his life in a Mayan village in Guatemala. Prechtel was the owner of, or shared his living space with, a very remarkable parrot: 'Ya Lur was famous far and wide, and highly coveted by the villagers for the astounding fact that, unlike most parrots, she was trilingual and had a memory like a recording machine'. Her role was 'secretarial answering machine or voice mail' in the compound. But she always played back what she had been told with interest, her message being 'mixed in with playbacks of women walking past our

compound arguing about the price of tomatoes, complaining about their neighbours …' On top of 'repeating any gossip whatsoever … redoing the dialogue using different silly parrot voices for each person', she would 'even imitate our laughter during her fine performances, repeating in turn even what we said about that. She was an auditory mirror.'[21] Or, as we might say, she was the medium by means of which 'society' came into being. No wonder that the villagers regarded 'a Lur speech as meaningful, mysterious, and coming from the world of the Deities'.[22]

Of course, this understanding isn't new either. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Eliza Haywood published two periodicals called *The Parrot*. The first in the 1730s contained her anti-Walpole writings; the second, published in the aftermath of the 1745 rebellion, tried to capitalise on the continuing preoccupation with the Young Pretender—yet she said that neither was 'political'. But perhaps they were poll-itical. She understood that politics was not confined to the parliament and the coffee house. The discourse of power was polyvocal, contradictory and rumorous. It partook of fiction as much as fact. 'Self-consciously "parroting" information about trials, executions and appointments—information she reasonably could have collected and digested from other publications', Haywood intelligently mimicked the generic diversity of the print media, whose proliferating discourses, hollow, conventional and shocking, increasingly supplied the mirror in which society identified itself.[23] And one might add here that Haywood's sense of parrot as a community of speech is in sharp contrast with the assumption of her male contemporaries (Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison and Jonathan Swift among others) who treat parrot as an individual, usually female and a signature of intellectual weakness and emotional caprice. Their attitude prefigures the view that Society does not exist.

Hence, in regard to the web, the useful information it affords us about parrot is the information 'parrot' gives us about the web. That is, parrot belongs not to the content of the system but to its architecture. It is the symbol of a sociability that is empty of any other message, beyond this larger one, that prior and beyond the design of the web there exists the desire to communicate. This discovery is critical as it allows a way of reflecting on the limitations of the electronic imaginary as a medium of communication. Parrot may be parasitic on the web, but as the voice of society, explicitly devoted to saying nothing at all, it calls the web's bluff, identifying what passes for information there as gossip, a way of passing the time as we love ourselves and our others to death.

Can this insight into the way that parrot circulates in the electronic imaginary help us gain agency in saving parrots in the wild—which, leaving aside all the problems of definition, I take as a good? I think it can because it shows us that 'society' is not an empty signifier but has a significance that cannot be reduced to a unified meaning. This is, in effect, an argument for diversity that can be extended to other parts of our environment. But it will not be

applied unless we read the web critically, not as a source of information, but as a site of signifying non-sense. Parrot understanding would be an understanding of the critical role such noise plays in binding us together, and in relating us to the external world whose resistance to translation is, in this paradigm, not a source of anxiety but a phenomenon respectfully to embrace. As I have said elsewhere, the most remarkable thing about parrot is not perhaps that it speaks but that it listens.

PAUL **CARTER** is author of books including *The Lie of the Land* (1996), *Repressed Spaces* (2002) and *Material Thinking* (2004). His latest book, *Parrot*, is due for release in early 2006. He is a professorial research fellow in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne.

---

1. Paul Carter, *Parrot*, Reaktion Books, London, 2006—in the spirit of which I have preserved in this printed text something of the spoken rhythms and informality of 'Parrot Interpreter' when it was first presented to a live audience. All the topics too briefly alluded to here can be found more fully treated in the book, where dedicated parrotologists will also find the references they need to pursue their own further enquiries.
2. See Ono Komachi, *Poems, Stories, No plays*, trans. RE Teele and others, Garland, New York, 1993, p. 67.
3. As memorably reported by Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. J & D Weightman, Jonathan Cape, London, p. 219. For the present state of play on this topic, see Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology, chap 14, Modes of Thought, pp. 121–58 at <http://folk.uio.no/geirthe/Smallplaces.html>, Terence Turner, ' "We are Parrots"; "Twins are birds": Play of Tropes as Operational Structure', in *Beyond Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology*, ed. J Fernandez, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1991.
4. Chris Davis, 'Understanding Companion Bird Behavior, A New Paradigm: Behavior Modification to Enhance the Human/Pet Parrot Relationship,' Canadian Parrot Symposium, 1998 at <www.silvio-co.com/cps/articles/1998/1998 davis1.htm>.
5. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance,* Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, pp. 130–1.
6. Herbert Mason, *A Legend of Alexander; and, the Merchant and the Parrot,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Ind., 1986, p. 71.
7. Michel Serres, 'Laughs: The Misappropriated Jewels, or a Close Shave for the Prima Donna', *Art & Text*, 9, Autumn 1983, p. 17. Iago in the English translation, the macaw's name in Hergé's original is 'Co-co'.
8. Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory,* ed. P Williams & L Chrisman, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York, 1993, pp. 324–9.
9. See Joseph Forshaw, *Parrots of the World*, Lansdowne Editions, Willoughby, NSW, 1989, p. 32.
10. John Latham, *A General Synopsis of Birds*, London, 1776, p. 198.
11. Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1997, p. 63.
12. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1911, Parrot article. See <www.excite.co.jp/world/english/web/body/?wb_url=http%3A%2F%2Fencyclopedia.jrank.org%2FPAI_PAS%2FPARROT>.
13. Errol Fuller, *Extinct Birds*, Viking, London, 1987, p. 131.
14. In this context it is interesting to learn that there at least six archaeopteryx fossils vying for the title of ur-fowl. See John H Ostrom, 'Archaeopteryx' at <http://athena.english.vt.edu/~hagedorn/TechnicalWriting/Archaeoptryx.html>. Origins are a matter of scale and distance: the closer you look, the more you find.

15. See Sue Farlow, 'Bearers of a Lost Language' at <http://www.parrotchronicles.com/spetoct2002/maypore.htm>:
16. This argument is developed in *Parrot*, pp. 160–71.
17. Quoted by John Sparks, with Tony Soper, *Parrots: A Natural History*, David and Charles, London, 1990, p. 121.
18. John James Audubon, *Birds of America*, vol. IV. At <www.audubon.org/bird/BoA/F28_G1a.htm>.
19. In Western literature the parrot is most famously identified with 'Society' in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (see Maria Cristina Paganoni, 'Doubles, Dreams and Death in *Little Dorrit*' at <www.club.it/culture/culture2000/maria.cristina.paganoni/corpo.tx.paganoni.html>. In Meso-American literature it is almost a commonplace. See *Parrot*, p. 110.
20. David M Rasmussen, *Mythic-Symbolic Language and Philosophical Anthropology*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1971, p. 43.
21. Martin Prechtel, *Long Life, Honey in the Heart: A Story of Initiation and Eloquence from the Shores of a Mayan Lake*, Putnam, New York, 1999, p. 155.
22. Prechtel, p. 153.
23. See Catherine Ingrassia, 'Texts, Lies and the Marketplace …' at <www.has.vcu.edu/eng/symp/ing_txt.htm>.