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## **(Non)Human Alterities in Postmodern Novels about Metamorphoses (Will Self and Marie Darrieussecq Follow in the Satirical Footsteps of Apuleius)**

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**Abstract:** This essay examines the idea of otherness as it appears expressed, with all its experimental nuances and singularities, in two postmodern novels authored by Will Self (*Cock and Bull*) and Marie Darrieussecq (*Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*). Following in the footsteps of Apuleius, but also paying heed to the offshoots of the metamorphosis theme in the works of Homer or, more recently, of Franz Kafka and George Orwell, the two authors analyzed here give original spins to a topic that problematizes not only the possibility of (self-)transformation, but also the idea of monstrous otherness.

**Keywords:** Will Self; Marie Darrieussecq; Otherness; Metamorphosis; Identity; Satire; Sexuality; Monstrosity.

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The question of otherness<sup>1</sup> (whether we accept or reject it) depends, in effect, on how we view the issue of identity: are we the same as others or are we different from them? And if we are different, what distinguishes us so strongly that we become aware of our own diversity and otherness? Are we very similar to the communities and groups we belong to, or are we different from these communities, and is it precisely that difference that defines us, or grounds our identity? The question of otherness depends, as French philosopher Jean-Jacques Wunenburger considers, on the “imaginary scenarios”<sup>2</sup> that we produce and operate by. An imaginary scenario always implies a change, a transformation, a different reality; hence, otherness subtly persists even when we relate to matters that are, in principle, similar, related, or even identical<sup>3</sup>, because otherness is what defines and qualifies imagination itself<sup>4</sup>. Every kind of imagination can be explained precisely by the idea of otherness, since imagining always entails something metamorphosing into

something else. In grasping otherness, we use not only intellect and reason, but also emotions and feelings, so the following question arises naturally: what kind of response does otherness stir? Repulsion or mysterious attraction, fascination or negation?<sup>5</sup> In Jean-Jacques Wunenburger's view, there are two types of alterity: one reversible, positive, and centripetal, the other irreversible, negative, and centrifugal<sup>6</sup>. Identity and identity quests never have tedious, direct or predetermined outcomes, but are always tense, labyrinthine, fragmented and fragmented processes. The search for and the discovery of identity involve composite and broad (never concise or simple) ventures, and otherness is part of this complex array of human problems and speculations. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger classifies alterity in terms of four performative functions: 1. aesthetic otherness; 2. ontological alertness; 3. utopian otherness; 4. antinomian otherness or enantiodromic alterity<sup>7</sup>. In what follows, I will analyze two postmodern novels which assume (speculatively) two of the otherness types defined by Wunenburger: ontological otherness (in Will Self's novel) and antinomian otherness (in the novel written by Marie Darrieussecq). The latter could be seen as a form of *radical difference* if we adopt the formula proposed by Jean Baudrillard and Marc Guillaume in their book *Figuri ale alterității (Radical Alterity)*, which indicates that such difference is "inassimilable, incomprehensible and even unimaginable"<sup>8</sup>. From the angle of dogma and tradition, this radical alterity or antinomian otherness is perceived as monstrous, flawed and averse, by definition, to all that is human. Thus, the question that arises is whether we can change

this pattern or perception canon of (radical) otherness, or whether this canon is, from the start, immovable, invariable, and unalterable.

Tzvetan Todorov's mental and ethical perspective on otherness in his book *The Conquest of America. The Question of the Other* could also be relevant for this analysis, albeit only partially. Referring to the way in which the Native Americans (Aztecs, Mayans, etc.) were perceived by the Spanish conquistadors, Todorov highlights three aspects of the problem of alterity: 1. the *axiological plan*, in which the other is seen as good / bad, equal / inferior; 2. the *praxiological plan*, which depends on the closeness to / distance from the other or, respectively, assimilation and submission *versus* indifference to the other; 3. the *epistemic plan*, in which the other is approached through knowledge and recognition *versus* through ignorance<sup>9</sup>. This (triple) layered problem of alterity is fascinating not only insofar as approaches to the other are concerned, but also to oneself, in the case of characters who are marked by major physical differences in the novels written by Will Self and Marie Darrieussecq that are analyzed in this essay. The sensitive issue, to be interpreted in the light of the notion of (non-human, or perhaps even anti-human) corporeal heresy resides, therefore, not only in the way we relate to other people (in the community), following a metamorphosis that alienates us and sets us apart from the community, but also in the way in which we relate to ourselves, the way in which we build bridges between our old identity and our new alterity (including in physical terms), from an axiological, praxiological and epistemic point of view.

### A Posthuman Eden!?

If we could revive Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung and if we could reenact their famous thirteen-hour long Viennese walk from 1907, in which together they mapped the future of psychoanalysis, we would perhaps witness an applied discussion about the libidinal obsessions of the two sexes: penis envy, in the case of women; vagina envy, in the case of men. We could also add the two ancestral fears of the two sexes: the fear of rape (in the case of the fair sex) and the fear of castration (in the case of the strong sex). Will Self's novel *Cock and Bull* engages in an analysis of these two types of fears and envies, focusing particularly on two of the characters: Carol and Bull. But the book is neither about phallocentrism nor about vaginocentrism, so it will disappoint both the machos and the feminists who might have hoped that this would be a novel with a clear gender agenda, even though there are critics who have reproached the book for its ostensive sexism<sup>10</sup> and its relatively predictable satire<sup>11</sup>. *Cock and Bull* raises a much more acute, postmodern dilemma: touching on issues such as hermaphroditism and transsexuality, Will Self relies, in fact, on the interchangeability of sexual organs, as well as on the ontological and cognitive effects of this interchangeability. The core topic is actually alterity. In Will Self's novel, the projected world is a uchronia, a world of "what if's", so both the author and the reader have every right to ask themselves the following questions: what would have happened if women had been born endowed with a phallus (instead of a vagina), and if men had been born with a vagina (instead of a phallus)? What if things

had been the other way around from the point of view of the sexual organs accredited among the human species? Will Self's answer is dual: things would have been absurd and grotesque, but also funny and picturesque. Things would have been different in a world in which otherness would have counted, perhaps, as normal.

Why is Carol growing a polyp that is going to turn into a penis? Psychoanalytically speaking, Carol is dissatisfied with men. If that is the case, the only compensatory solution is to usurp, as a woman, the role of man. In the psychological backstage of Will Self's book there lies, however, something else: an ancestral reference to the minotaur or the bacchante that dwells within every human being, the repressed Dionysianism that surfaces only under pressure and in extreme cases. We do not necessarily know who we really are and who or what lurks in our sexual depths. Therefore, it is not the rewritten story of Gregor Samsa from Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* that should be sought in *Cock and Bull*, but the corporeal abilities of the human mind, with its infinite physical and psychological reconstructive potential. From this point of view, Will Self's novel is akin to *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*, Maria Darrieussecq's strange narrative about a woman who turns into a sow. Ironically and humorously, Carol's story anticipates the French writer's protagonist. The latter is based on a literary pattern provided by Apuleius's lesson (Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis, who lived and wrote in the second century AD) in his lewd, yet satirical novel *The Golden Ass*, whose protagonist, Lucius, a nobleman of Corinth, travels to Thessaly and, becoming fascinated by the magical skills

of Pamphile, the witch, demands Photis (Pamphile's servant and his lover) to turn him into a bird. The noble metamorphosis fails and, due to a miscalculation of ingredients, Lucius is turned into an ass. Here is where the picaresque initiation journey (in a mystical sense) of Lucius the ass begins. He preserves intact his human faculties of thought and feeling, even though his body undergoes an ignoble metamorphosis. Apuleius's novel lends itself very well to psychoanalytical interpretations, particularly considering its complex portrayal of human sexuality, which is also evident in the fact that Shakespeare himself assumed this narrative lesson from the book of the Latin writer, albeit episodically, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Like *The Golden Ass*, Self's book is ironic and self-ironic, carnivalesque, serious and funny, at the same time, evincing a culturally syncretic openness. Sexual transformation is not treated in a coarse and vulgar manner, but triggers subtle meditative connotations that reflect, as stated above, on the theme of alterity. But while Lucius in *The Golden Ass* is turned back into a human, becoming, by the end of the novel, initiated into the mysteries of the gods Isis, Osiris, and Serapis, the protagonists of Will Self and of Darriussecq suffer from a quasi-eternal metamorphosis, being initiated into the "mysteries" of a postmodern world that is out of kilter, off-centered, alienated from itself.

In both Will Self's and Maria Darriussecq's novels, metamorphosis is not necessarily punitive, but also revealing or psychologically stimulating. It must also be pointed out that it is not God who decides the metamorphosis (in the sense that there is no demiurge who oversees such transformations or speculations related

to otherness), but a kind of hazard of the characters, as if their strange somatizations were a consequence of their inner desire for change and for something else. Alterity becomes the dominant matrix and is celebrated as such, since it brings forth absolute novelty in the human regime (even where otherness may bring about bad consequences).

Another idea that haunts Self's novel is the following: when there are bodily frustrations, but also compensatory fantasies, they often lead to a somatization of the aberrant psyche. And Carol's aberration is her possible manhood, compared to the inoperative and withered phalluses of men. Her suddenly emerged penis is a somatization of her sexual and mental alienation. As the two characters (Carol and Bull) develop opposite sexual organs, one might say that the strangeness of Will Self's writing and subject matter is linked to the lyrical-visceral portrayal of former organs and new organs, in an exciting reconstruction of the female and male anatomy. This is not the Garden of Eden, but the Garden of the Fall, a Posthuman Eden rather perhaps, in which neither the male nor the female needs a counterpart in the couple, since each works by itself, containing both sexes at the same time! Adam and Eve exist in their own right, having adapted, in a way, to the times, to society and to its genital fantasies or reveries!

Will Self envisages himself, perhaps, as a sort of new (postmodern) Frankenstein, one who makes acceptable "human monsters", which are nonetheless adjusted to the frustrations, complexes, yearnings and lusts of the contemporary world. It is a world that is obsessed (and fascinated) with the body, raising it to a divine level or, on

the contrary, defiling it – voluptuously, in either case. The ironic stake of Self’s book is to speculate on the existence, in the reader, of a “psycho-empathic voyeurism” (the term belongs to the author himself, being voiced by one of the secondary characters). Of course, there are many “genital” dialogues and meditations in the novel, which process and deliver ideas revolving around this core sexualized imagery. The penis or the vagina may very well be mere metaphorical or symbolic references, but the author opts for an overt challenge, namely: despite their bizarre nature, the new penis and the new vagina must be real, physical, concrete, and not imaginary. Having a penis does not necessarily mean being a man and the reverse is also true: having a vagina does not necessarily mean being a woman. Both characters have dual natures, convening the *anima* and the *animus* in one body. This is another premise of Will Self’s book.

The penis with which Carol is endowed (through a mysterious genetic occurrence) is a floral organ, especially since Carol the woman is not left without a vagina: she remains a woman, but also becomes a man, and so her sexual endowment is twofold. The floral organ will, however, turn out to have rapist and murderous propensities. I would have preferred the first part of the book to end with this metamorphosis, without foregrounding the comment on this exchange through the confession of the psychopathic heroine, disguised as a man, for the revelatory effect is lost at this point.

Symmetrically with Carol’s case, Bull’s story is that of a man who suddenly discovers a vagina behind his knee: the second part of *Cock and Bull* is somewhat related (in a sarcastic sense, though) to Franz

Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. The vagina is initially perceived as a “malevolent intruder”, as a foreign and disgraceful wound, as an “infection” (the author here inventories all the constricting mindsets of patriarchal society, frightened by myriad vaginas with or without teeth!). Then, vaginized Bull becomes Dr. Alan’s sexual partner. Dr. Alan is addicted to fantasy pornography and the two end up procreating life. The man who will contain a woman in his body will get to perceive the whole of London as an urban conglomerate of vagina-edifices! The second part of the novel is intentionally grotesque, requiring the reader to be receptive to the text’s irony, for there are plenty of hilarious passages. Fortunately, the author’s proneness to mockery is quite apparent. As I have already pointed out, seriousness is not absent from this post-modern narrative of metamorphosis and alterity, but it is a seriousness to the limit, since the novel shows that any form of sexuality (be it an aberrant one) opens up a deep sense of awareness in human beings, given its cathartic and, perhaps, its “epiphanic” potential.

*Cock and Bull* is an alert novel that arouses, through its shocking, peculiar theme, the curiosity of being read in one breath, all the way through, to the end. It is a book about genital anomalies that pervert and alienate, although they also have an illuminating side. From the point of view of the facts it depicts, it is a strange book, raising issues that make one ponder, willy-nilly, whether one is a woman or a man. And readers are, indeed, driven to meditate and reflect on the fantasies and complexes instrumented by the author (although they are not about Oedipus or Electra, far from it!).

### Pig-Morphism, with a Twist

A woman (who is a shop assistant in a perfume shop, an erotic masseuse, and a prostitute) is transformed into a sow who will transcribe this extravagant experience of metamorphosis at leisure (in short, this is the subject of Marie Darrieussecq's novel entitled *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation* (the French original *Truismes* was published back in 1996). Readers may already be accustomed to ignoble metamorphoses from a number of texts read at different ages: but the iconic and tragic case of the twentieth century remains that of the Kafkaian human-cockroach Gregor Samsa (mentioned above), or that of the absurd rhinoceros from Eugène Ionesco's famous play. It should be noted that there is a well-known Romanian fairy-tale written by Ion Creangă, one of the canonical Romanian writers, entitled *The Pig's Tale*, in which Prince Charming is turned into a pig (through sorcery); in the end, the man will resume his human shape, in a happy ending that is only to be found in fairy-tales, after a series of initiation experiences, involving both him and his chosen princess, a rather disobedient young woman. It is also worth mentioning the antiutopia *Animal Farm*, precisely for the totalitarian metaphor encapsulated by the pig figure in George Orwell's micronovel, a meaning that the French author's novel opposes. Although the transformation of Marie Darrieussecq's character predictably goes through some decaying and disgraceful stages, she does not regret her metamorphosis, as we will see below.

The central part of the novel focuses, with excessive (i.e. infinitesimal) details, on physical disaggregation and reaggregation.

First there occur intimate disorders, then the heroine gains tremendous weight, her appetizing body gaining colossal size. She begins to have absurd dreams, cravings and nausea. The syndrome is that of a pregnant woman, but she appears to be progressively distasteful and unalluring. Her sexual skills, however, are increasingly appreciated by the perfume shop customers. There are a few diaphanous scenes: for example, the woman who will turn into a sow begins to swallow flowers. Her posterior becomes her main bodily part (encompassing her craving for sexual fulfilment). Her sexual lust is relentless. She is in fact a superwoman (a sow) who libidinally dominates her men. The heroine's metamorphosis is far from over: she suffers from endless skin rashes, develops a third breast (soon, the pig-woman will be endowed with six nipples), and rebellious hairs and other epidermal curiosities make her perceive herself as monstrous. It is still not clear, however, what ferocious beast resides in her, but a "porcine air" begins to take over her being, becoming all the more evident when she realizes that she has the propensity to adopt a four-legged position, relativizing her humanity and adopting a penchant for grunting. Her diet changes and she adapts to it: she begins to eat raw potatoes, chestnuts and acorns. She becomes a creature tormented by solitude: she is a "stranger" (in an inherited existentialist sense), alienated from and incompatible with the world. She finds it harder and harder to articulate words. The appealing woman of yesteryear has become a mass of flesh (fit with a pigtail!): amorphous matter, eager to roll in the mud and lie in the sun, from the madding crowd. The beast gives birth, at one point, to six piglets, although she is

still human; she lives with the tramps for a while, then goes to the hospice (where she turns cannibal, feeding on the rotting bodies of psychiatrists!). The carousel of change and events catalyzes an abundance of oddities that the author speculates on in her narrative. The heroine's life is narrated not pathetically, but with a good pinch of black humor that reveals an intention to caricature human society at the end of the twentieth century (a pigsty society, perhaps!). Hence, the alert pace of reading, without the risk of causing allergies to readers when faced with the protagonist's change into a monstrous animal. The heroine ends up as a beast at an orgiastic banquet thrown by a seasoned politician. There is a suspicion that the woman has become a mutant because of nuclear waste. At this point, Maria Darrieussecq's novel spills over into copious political satire. Then the heroine becomes the companion of an African priest and sorcerer, who tries to turn her back into a woman (using mysterious potions). The pig-woman is now at the mercy of a paranoid exorcist. The ending of the novel suggests that she has a chance to be re-humanized, but this possibility is withheld from the readers.

The author was reproached for not criticizing patriarchal society enough and for allowing her protagonist to capitalize on misogynistic biases with excessive naivety<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, other reviewers admired the parody of *The Odyssey* that Marie Darrieussecq succeeds in conveying, not only from the point of view of the initiation route traveled by the heroine, but also in a Circean sense: what the goddess Circe does, by turning Odysseus' shipmen into pigs (failing, however, to impress this transformation upon Odysseus himself,

who subsequently forced the sorceress to turn the pigs back into people), also happens, self(ironically), to the protagonist of *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*. She, however, does not regret her metamorphosis. On the other hand, Maria Darrieussecq's novel has been praised as sharp social satire and as a "critical meta-text" focused on deconstructing the process of othering a woman through sexual objectification<sup>13</sup>.

The pig-woman is not the only human-animal hybrid in the world in which she lives and survives, a world where she meets her archetypal match, in a neat and classy wolf-man (with whom she falls in love *because* she catches him in the process of changing into an animal); the couple is an exotic and challenging one, as it consists of a female pig and a male lycanthrope! The question that the author raises at this point is a charismatic and aesthetic one: even in these hybrids one could uncover a form of splendor, because the virile silver-furred wolf-man reveals himself to the pig-woman to be the incarnation of beauty (even if he is, willy-nilly, a serial devourer, an assassin who kills in order to satisfy the needs of his lycanthropic identity). The couple will be dissolved when the authorities capture the crux of their animal metamorphosis, which means the lycanthrope will be shot (then stuffed and exhibited at the Natural History Museum), and the sow will be locked in the zoo, from where she will eventually escape. She is already a pig, but one that continues to think like a human, even if she no longer feels to be adequate and coherent among people. The world of pigs is truer and simpler and, therefore, it deserves to be chosen (or, more precisely, it deserves to become the destiny

of humans). This is the idea for which the heroine pleads, as if she were the intended reader of one of the forerunners of modern French poetry, Arthur Rimbaud<sup>14</sup>, who, in his de-tabooing and brilliantly innovative lyrical texts, advocated, at one point, the superiority of alterity, championing the possibility of amorous passion for a pig. The same Rimbaud declared, seminally, *Je est un autre*, revolutionizing the concept of alterity in his visionary letters.

*Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation* is a fable-novel. It is a text about the crisis of identity and about the difficulty of remaining human and bipedal. We live in a huge Zoological Garden, where Darwinian survival is already obsolete. The discourse of the heroine in Marie Darrieussecq's novel is pro-pigs (and not anti-rhinocerotization, as is the case in Eugène Ionesco's famous play), for even by staying only half human one can be more human than the so-called real people who, despite their normal bodies, are driven by corrupt, mercenary, self-righteous supremacism). Should the Bildungsroman of a "sow" serve as a lesson for minimal or maximal human existence?!

*Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation* is a book that psychoanalytically materializes one of the key fantasies of men and patriarchal society or of aggressive machismo, namely that women are tramps ("sows"). The layered construction and, implicitly, the deconstruction (of this fantasy) in Marie Darrieussecq's narrative is an ironic one. The author takes the phantasmal projection to the end (with all the ceremonial of predictable lasciviousness, but kept in check by a good pinch of black humor). At the same time, she debunks psychoanalysis and its strategies precisely

through the elements of the circus-like grotesque. Not in vain are the bodies of the psychiatrists in the asylum where the sow-heroine arrives devoured in a natural act of cannibalism. Finally, the heroine chooses to remain a sow (in the forest), away from people, away from their habits, methods and customs, away from all canons and dogmas. When she remembers that she is still half human, the heroine can still watch television like a peaceful denizen of the domestic space!

Alterity that entails special ontological and cognitive propensities is, in fact, a topic that fascinates the two authors, Will Self and Marie Darrieussecq. In their novels *Cock and Bull* and *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*, exacerbated human sexuality becomes the butt of satire through that very exacerbation. Addressing similar concerns and being published relatively simultaneously (the French novel came out only four years after the British one), the two writers reconfigure the spectacular ancient narrative pattern of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, emphasizing both the initiation that metamorphosis unleashes and the satire pertaining to the non-human (rather than the anti-human) dimension that humans can assume and internalize. However, their protagonists do not resume their former condition (unlike the central character Lucius in the novel of Apuleius). Their transformation lingers on, as a sign that society itself has undergone transmutations or, perhaps, as a sign that the mutants themselves are on the verge of changing the canon and institutionalizing that change, through the very violation of that human canon.

Translated by Carmen-Veronica Borbély



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## NOTES

1. This essay develops, enlarges upon and nuances two texts I published in *Biblioteca stranie*, București, Editura Curtea Veche, 2010, pp. 135-144.
2. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, "Introductions. Structures et fonctions des imaginaires de l'altérité (alter-hétéros)", in *Caietele Echinox*, volume 36, 2019, p. 11.
3. *Ibidem*, p. 12.
4. *Ibidem*: "Donc l'altérité n'est pas un type, une catégorie particulière d'imaginaire mais qualifie l'imagination elle-même".
5. *Ibidem*, p.13.
6. *Ibidem*.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 15.

8. Jean Baudrillard, Marc Guillaume, *Figuri ale alterității*, trans. by Ciprian Mihali, Pitești, Editura Paralela 45, 2002, p. 4.
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14. Arthur Rimbaud, *Scrieri alese*, trans. by Petre Solomon and N. Argintescu-Amza, foreword by Al. Philippide, notes and commentaries by Irina Bădescu, București, Edtura pentru literatură universală, 1968, p. 157. See a passage from the poem "Alchimie du Verbe" (Alchemy of the Word): "À chaque être, plusieurs autres vies me semblaient dues. Ce monsieur ne sait ce qu'il fait : il est un ange. Cette famille est une nichée de chiens. Devant plusieurs hommes, je causai tout haut avec un moment d'une de leurs autres vies. - Ainsi, j'ai aimé un porc." ("It seemed to me that everyone should have had several other lives as well. This gentleman doesn't know what he's doing: he's an angel. That family is a litter of puppy dogs. With some men, I often talked out loud with a moment from one of their other lives. - That's how I happened to love a pig"). The English translation is taken from Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, Translated from the French by Paul Schmidt, London, Harper Collins, 1967, p. 237.