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Strangling the Parrot

Ros Gray

A flock of green parakeets converge at a feeding station in my garden in south east London. They form an unruly, squabbling queue that descends through the overhanging branches of a neighbouring plum tree to where the sunflower seeds hang temptingly from a wrought iron pole. Green parakeets are much reviled in this vicinity for their loud squawks, and are accused, sometimes xenophobically, of scaring away smaller ‘native’ birds. But I am seduced by their bright green plumage and red beaks, and I love their acrobatic eating and the symbiotic relationship they have with the plump woodpigeons that waddle below, pecking up the debris of scattered seeds. Urban myths about their provenance abound – that they all descend from a pair that Jimi Hendrix released in Carnaby Street in 1966, or from birds that escaped from Ealing Studios, where Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor filmed the historical pageant *Cleopatra* in 1963. It seems appropriate that this now commonplace urban bird had its moment of arrival at a time when 1960s psychedelia fully embraced the exotic and Hollywood’s ‘mass ornament’ had reached baroque proportions.¹ Once the parakeets have sated themselves, they depart in a flurry of shrieks, and the smaller birds move in – blue tits, goldfinches, sparrows, a robin, a wren. Every few days I take down the containers and sterilise them. *Passarine salmonellosis*, *finch trichomoniasis*, *aspergillosis*, *paridae pox* are all avian diseases spread at overcrowded feeding stations.² While ostensibly supporting wildlife threatened by the ongoing insect Armageddon, the birdfeeder is also a device offering a certain kind of spectacle that brings different species into an ‘unnatural’ anthropocenic proximity, an ideal situation for unleashing pathogens. Delight turns to doubt: exactly what kind of ‘feral proliferations’ am I enabling?³

¹ The phrase ‘mass ornament’ is adapted here from Siegfried Kracauer, who used it to describe the ‘extravagant spectacles’ exemplified by the Tiller Girls that featured large numbers of dancers performing choreographed movements, forming elaborate abstract patterns. Kracauer argued that it was important to analyse ‘surface-level expressions’ of popular culture so as to understand the ‘overall constitution’ of a given society. While Kracauer saw the early-twentieth-century mass ornament as symptomatic of a drive towards an abstracted, non-erotic rationalisation of organic bodies that echoed the ‘aspirations of the current economic system’ (American Fordist capitalism), the baroque is perhaps that kaleidoscopic moment when surface pattern tips over into excess, breaking the ‘illusion’ of ‘the ornament’s conformity to reason’. Siegfried Kracauer, ‘The Mass Ornament’, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, pp.75–86.

² ‘Garden bird feeders help spread disease among wild birds’, *The Guardian*, Monday 20 March 2018. Lawson et al (2012), ‘Emergence of a novel avian pox disease in British tit species’, *PLOS ONE*.

³ Anna Tsing describes how anthropogenic systems that benefit particular species to the detriment of biodiversity tend to produce ‘feral proliferations’ of fungal disease, parasites and viruses that more complex and robust

In her sketching of the figure 'Enlightenment Man', who stands at the heart of the 'Anthropocene', Anna Tsing tells a series of tales about exploits carried out in the name of 'modernisation', 'civilization' and 'efficiency'. The Anthropocene is 'patchy' precisely because, in Tsing's account, these 'machines of replication' (pig farms, Fordlandia, the timber industry), which engineer simplified ecologies for the sake of maximising profit, have often resulted in eruptions of disease that sometimes destroy the very enterprises that accidentally facilitated their spread.⁴ One of the things we learn from Tsing is that the history of 'Man', often pictured metaphorically as a stage in which 'Nature' is the static backdrop, has never been so singular as it was previously imagined, at least from Eurocentric perspectives.⁵ Rather, the stage of history once thought to be the realm of great men, their words and actions, has always been an entangled, multi-stranded, raucous, criss-crossing, emergent, more-than-human ecological story in which insects, plants, fungi and pathogens play important roles.

Take, for example, the emergence of absinthe in the nineteenth century. The drink was first made in Switzerland by Henri Louis Pernod in 1797. Pernod distilled the beverage out of the plant *Artemisia absinthium*, also known as wormwood, mixed with ethyl alcohol, anise, fennel, lemon balm and hyssop. The chlorophyll in these leaves gives absinthe a lurid green colour, which disappears on serving the drink when it is diluted with water and sugar dissolved in a spoon that is balanced over the glass, a process called 'louching' that creates a cloudy effect. It was taken as an anti-malarial and as vermifugal tonic to ward off intestinal worms by French soldiers fighting colonial campaigns across Northern Africa in the 1830s and 1840s. The soldiers took a liking to its pleasant aroma and psychoactive properties, adding it to their drinking water to make it palatable. They returned to France with a taste for absinthe, which could contain as much as 80% pure alcohol. Absinthe's reputation took dramatic twists and turns, becoming first a patriotic tippie for the bourgeoisie, who associated it with the military, then a substitute for gin

ecological systems are able to fend off. Anna Tsing (2016), 'Earth Stalked by Man', *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 34, 1, pp.2–16.

⁴ While claims of universality associated with the Anthropocene suggest totalisation, Tsing stresses the incompleteness and unevenness of its impact:

'Anthropocene is global; it only makes sense on a planetary scale. And yet Anthropocene is also always parochial, perspectival and performative. This is not just because various people imagine Anthropocene differently, or even just because global systems impact on various kinds of people differently. It's more than this. Anthropocene is patchy because it is composed of varied assemblages of liveability. It exists only in and through those patches.'

Tsing (2016).

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that the discipline of History has tended to figure Nature as a static backdrop to the drama of human affairs, which in his argument means that climate change brings about the collapse of human history and natural history. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009), 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35, Winter, pp.197–222.

among the poor, and hallucinogenic poetry for bohemian artists and writers.⁶ Oscar Wilde was famously quoted by Ada Leverson describing his experience with absinthe:

Three nights I sat up all night drinking absinthe, and thinking that I was singularly clear-headed and sane. The most wonderful flowers, tulips, lilies and roses sprang up and made a garden of the café. ‘Don’t you see them?’ I said to him. ‘Mais non, Monsieur; il n’ya rien.’⁷

It became such an infamous cultural phenomenon that 5pm was named *L’Heure verte*, the ‘green hour’, when artists would leave the solitude of their studios to drink in the bars of the Parisian boulevards. Its vibrant green glow gave rise to a number of nicknames – ‘The Green Fairy’, ‘The Emerald Mask’, ‘The Parrot’. To imbibe a glass or two of the green stuff was referred to colloquially as ‘*étouffer un perroquet*’ - to strangle a parrot.

The ascendance of absinthe coincided with a crisis in the wine industry in France precipitated by the proliferation of an aphid-based infestation named phylloxera that decimated the vineyards.⁸ The wine industry fought back with a propaganda campaign that broadcast its toxic properties: absinthe was responsible for the ruination of the Third Republic, for madness, decadence, even murder.⁹ A new term, ‘Absinthism’, came into circulation to describe a condition that was thought to be far more serious than alcoholism. What was once hailed as a substance offering medicinal protection from parasitic illness, now threatened degeneracy. The drink became implicated in the creative mania of Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Edvard Munch, August Strindberg, Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe, among others, but also in the excessive episodes that fuelled myths about the relationships that raged between some of these figures. As if a whole host of social ills could be remedied by outlawing The Green Fairy, by the time it was legislated against in France in 1915, Jad Adams notes, ‘the French high command was sending 1000-litre barrels of wine to the front to sustain troop morale’.¹⁰ Absinthe was the *pharmakon* exemplified – at once cure, poison and scapegoat.

⁶ Jad Adams (2004), *Hideous Absinthe: A History of the Devil in a Bottle*, London: I.B. Tauris.

⁷ Oscar Wilde and Ada Leverson (1930), *Letters to the Sphinx from Oscar Wilde*, London: Duckworth.

⁸ Anon (1986), ‘The Great French Wine Blight’, *Wine Tidings*, no.96.

⁹ In 1905 a Swiss farmer, Jean Lanfray, hanged himself in prison after being convicted of murdering his wife and children after a drinking binge in which consumed two and a half litres of wine, two and a half litres of *piquette* (homemade red wine), several brandies, cordials and one or two absinthes. Lanfray pleaded innocent, claiming his actions were due to absinthe delirium. Jad Adams (2004), *Hideous Absinthe: A History of the Devil in a Bottle*, London: I.B. Tauris. Jad Adams (2004), p.10 and pp.205–207.

¹⁰ Jad Adams (2004), p.214.

Green – the colour for all things environmentally friendly and wholesome and at the same time one that symbolises our most shameful feelings and sickly states – jealousy, gullibility, dread and nausea. How fitting then, that the aesthetic most readily associated with the *fin-de-siècle* cultural moment of absinthe is Art Nouveau, a claustrophobic decorative style now recognised as a form of ‘imperial modernism’ that features fey young women presented as sexually available and entangled in foliage and flowers.¹¹ They lounge in spaces of artifice and ornamentation that are strangely ungrounded, at times suggestive of interiors or of a garden, intoxicating dreams that could at any moment slip into the realm of nightmare. Art Nouveau panels decorated the cafés where absinthe was drunk, and Art Nouveau advertised the new commodities of modernity – cigarettes, soap, theatrical performances. It also decorated the houses of the French and Belgian elite, whose fortunes were often tied to the African colonies, where genocidal violence created vast riches for Europe through the extraction of natural resources such as timber and minerals. Banisters that crept up marble staircases like plant tendrils, exotic birds that perched around lampshades, sgraffito façades depicting women with billowing hair and voluminous drapery offset the angular forms of African masks and sculptures stripped of their original social function to become trophies of empire. Absinthe delirium and the fantasy world of Art Nouveau might both be understood as a passage of escape from the horrors of the dark side of European modernity.

Much of Art Nouveau is now inescapably kitsch, but it retains a fascination that has led to numerous subcultural returns, particularly when the desire to break free from conformity takes the form of ornamental excess, a loosening of binaries of sexuality and gender, cross-cultural exchange and experimentation with altered states of consciousness. Elizabeth Galt points out that lush and colourful decorative styles have historically been rejected by a patriarchal colonial bias that sees ornamentation as ‘feminine’, ‘oriental’, ‘primitive’ and ‘perverse’.¹² Such is the case with Art Nouveau, even while it is a product of a particular conjuncture of colonial violence.

Galt interprets visually rich films, ranging from the [experimental](#) works of Derek Jarman to Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge* (2003), as emblematic of an artistic tendency in which the excessive ornamentation embodies a queer aesthetic that presents non-conformist sexual and political identities in a style that revels in perverse pleasures. In her discussion of toxicity in relation to queer, racialised and disabled subjects, Mel Y. Chen recalls the now obsolete secondary definitions of the term ‘queer’ as both ‘unwell’ and ‘drunk’, meanings that shadow queerness

¹¹ Imperial Modernism refers to styles of architecture and design that developed in the context of late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century European colonial regimes. Debora L. Silverman (2013), ‘Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part III’, *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design, History and Material Culture*, 20, 1, p.3–61.

¹² Rosalind Galt (2011), *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image*, New York: Columbia University Press.

with associations of intoxication and poisoning.¹³ In *Moulin Rouge*, Kylie Minogue plays The Green Fairy. She is depicted on the label of a bottle of Absinthe, but as soon as the drinker takes the first sip she springs off the label—animated as a fluorescent Tinkerbell on acid, flickering like a faulty lightbulb, she multiplies into a line of showgirls, at once seductive, manic and disorienting. Her movements captivate the group of inebriated revellers, who ascend the façade of the Moulin Rouge, swaying dangerously until the entire image fragments into swirling vertiginous fall.

As the historical range of the films discussed by Galt suggests, the ripples of Art Nouveau spread widely through the twentieth century, resurfacing as an undercurrent even when prevailing cultural conditions might seem hostile to its louche artifice. In my early teens in the 1980s I had an innocent affection for the posters of Alphonse Mucha, which depict young women characteristic of Art Nouveau whose long hair mingles with plant tendrils, cigarette smoke and ornate abstract patterns. In the years before rave, those uncomfortable with the monochrome severity of the goths and the flashy conformity of the casuals formed a lesser-known tribe of ‘freaks’ who wore lacey, ruffled Victoriana and listened to Jimi Hendrix and Fleetwood Mac. Around this time, I had a short-lived cottage industry sewing velvet hats with floppy brims held up with a second-hand pin or brooch. I sourced off-cuts from a friend who had a Saturday job at a genteel dress shop in Oxford called Annabelinda, which specialised in ballgowns for wealthy students. It was owned by a certain Howard Marks, who was shortly afterwards arrested because he was using this outfit as a cover for a worldwide cannabis-smuggling empire. He presented himself as ‘Mr Nice’, a hippy adventurer whose dealings cut across international borders and involved secret service agencies, terrorist organisations and drug kings like Pablo Escobar.¹⁴

In a paper published in *Nature* in 1975, a time when absinthe was still outlawed, scientists J. Del Castillo and M. Anderson argued there were ‘striking similarities between the psychological actions of thujone in absinthe and the tetrahydrocannabinol of the marijuana plant’.¹⁵ They claimed these two plant substances had similar molecular geometry and interact with the same pharmacological receptors in the central nervous system - an effect called the receptor affinity.

¹³ Mel Y. Chen (2012), *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 198.

¹⁴ Howard Marks (1996), *Mr Nice*, London: Secker and Warburg.

¹⁵ J. Del Castillo and M. Anderson (1975), ‘Marijuana, absinthe and the central nervous system’, *Nature*, 253, 31 January 1975, pp.365–366. For a discussion of twentieth-century scientific research into the effect of thujone, see Adams (2004), pp.63–64.

As was later proven, Del Castillo and Anderson were wrong.¹⁶ Thujone does not act like a cannabinoid. But concluding the brief article, the authors dryly note that as well as suggesting new avenues for the study of pharmacology and toxicology, the affinities between these psychoactive materials are ‘also interesting from a historical and sociological point of view’.¹⁷ The scientific testing of psychotropic plants that has taken place in the laboratory has often overlapped with amateur experiments in diverse sites of sociability, such as dinner tables or clubs.

Carl Gent’s performative samplings of absinthe, a series titled *L’Heure verte* convened as part of his residency at KELDER, evoke these traditions of amateur experimentation with the effects of plants. *L’Heure verte: 1st Tasting* was a performance and absinthe tasting that ‘marked the opening of the debut bottle of Gent’s home-distilled absinthe and the continuation of work at the gallery Green Ray that began with the redesigning of their logo with a design that paid homage to the flourishes and curves of Art Nouveau. *L’Heure verte: 2nd Tasting* took place at Goldsmiths Allotment on the occasion of a Halloween gathering.¹⁸ Gent had been growing wormwood and other herbs on their allotment plot to make into absinthe and over a number of years the wormwood fronds have sprawled upwards like a mop of uncombed hair. The tasting involved a demonstration of the distillation process delivered to an audience of witches, spiders and wizards who listened attentively, while nursery children brought in to judge the pumpkin carving competition ran amok among the allotment plots.

Gent’s subsequent durational project at KELDER involved the two-month manufacture of absinthe and the production of four absinthe sculptures, all of which received the body of liquid at different periods in the production process and were activated by a performance. The work was located in a basement, the walls decorated with a thin wash in chartreuse,¹⁹ with hints of plant tendrils in darker green that extended around a counter where the distillation took place. The first part of *Traddutore, Traditore (a new translation)* involved the **initial** maceration of absinthe in a glass demijohn, accompanied by a performance by Gent. An MP3 player was attached to the bung of the demijohn so that music entered the spirit, in this case Skeeter Davis’ ‘The End of

¹⁶ J.P. Meschler et al. (1999), ‘Thujone Exhibits Low Affinity for Cannabinoid Receptors but Fails to Evoke Cannabimimetic Responses’, *Pharmacology, Biochemistry and Behaviour*, 62, 3, pp.473–480.

¹⁷ J. Del Castillo and M. Anderson (1975).

¹⁸ Goldsmiths Allotment is a space for students and staff at Goldsmiths, University of London, to grow plants and support wildlife. As well as occasional workshops it has hosted exhibitions, performances and seasonal celebrations that mark the turning of the year and its rituals.

¹⁹ Chartreuse hovers between yellow and green and is both the colour and name of an alcoholic drink made by monks living in the Chartreuse Mountains in France. See the chapter ‘Chartreuse’ in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2014), *Prismatic Ecologies: Ecotheory beyond Green*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

the World’, a charming Cold War ballad that elevates doomed romance to the scale of nuclear Armageddon. Two weeks later Gent convened a skills-sharing workshop to decant the liquid from the demijohn and sieve it into the copper still to start distilling the alcohol. Gent named this performance *Testing the Receptor Affinity*, in tribute to the history of experimentation with psychotropic plants and the (sometimes mistaken) perceptions of affinities between different substances in magical practices as well as modern science. Participants assisted in mixing rye paste, tasting the alcohol and grinding up herbs in a pestle and mortar while Gent shared a range of instructions and digital files to everyone in attendance.

After another two weeks the third iteration, titled *Shrew Tree* staged the second maceration of the absinthe to a soundtrack of recordings from the Fukushima Daaichi nuclear disaster. The connection to nuclear contamination was established through coincidences in translation. In the Ukrainian language the word for Russian wormwood, or mugwort, is ‘Chernobyl’, a collision of meanings and disasters that only add to absinthe’s over-ripe association with toxicity. Guests ingested dishes that included as ingredients the same herbs that went into the absinthe. On this occasion, sobriety at the dinner table was required so that guests could test out the bodily effects of these botanicals in a state unclouded by alcohol. At the same time, they discussed cross-contamination and poisoning and added the final range of herbs to a second demijohn (the third sculpture), called *Shrew Tree*, the vessel so named following a magical practice in which a shrew is placed inside a tree and sealed in to curse the tree, supposedly to draw disease from livestock. Finally, three weeks after the second maceration when the absinthe was complete, *Contagion Heuristic* involved the siphoning of the liquid from the Shrew Tree and its serving with water, accompanied by a collective rendition of drinking songs.

The figure of Gent in this murky basement macerating herbs and decanting liquids amid glass and copper distillation vessels calls to mind a medieval alchemist. Indeed, the magical affinities, millennial fervour and radical dissidence of the medieval has long been a point of reference in their work. The wormwood plant plays numerous walk-on parts in the centuries that precede the Enlightenment, even going back to the *Book of Revelation*. In the original Koine Greek [version](#), wormwood is the name given to a star that falls to the Earth and poisons a third of the waterways and a third of the people. Over time, the word ‘wormwood’ has sometimes been translated, in biblical texts at least, as ‘bitter’, but even with these shifts in translation, the toxic associations of the absinthe plant cannot be so easily washed away. The medieval alchemist’s quest to create gold out of base matter was pursued against a backdrop of widespread panic about End Times and outbreaks of ergotism, a mould afflicting wheat that caused vivid

hallucinations as well as a host of other horrible symptoms, which may account for some of the nightmarish imagery of Hieronymous Bosch.²⁰ One needs to read at the interstices of historical translation, and here Gent shares a sensibility with Carolyn Dinshaw, to recognise how the medieval period's heretical experiments with heterogeneity dissolve into the present.²¹ Ripples in a glass of green.

How did we get here?

We have lingered too long.

Will you forgive me?

Of this there is no doubt.

We have strangled the parrot.

Good night.

²⁰ Laurinda Dixon (2003), *Bosch*, London: Phaidon.

²¹ Carolyn Dinshaw (1991), *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, Duke University Press.