

Natural History

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Department of English

Bar-Ilan University

Anthony Michael Morena

2-42395896-6

Adviser: Dr. Marcela Sulak

31/8/2013

כותרת זמנית

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

אנתוני מיקאל מורנה

2-42395896-6

מנחה די"ר מרצלה שולק

31/8/2013

Natural History

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Department of English

Bar-Ilan University

Anthony Michael Morena

2-42395896-6

Adviser: Dr. Marcela Sulak

31/8/2013

כותרת זמנית

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

אנתוני מיקאל מורנה

2-42395896-6

מנחה ד"ר מרצלה שולק

31/8/2013

Table of Contents

Aims and Description.....2

Conceptual Background.....2

Shape of the Work.....7

Bibliography.....10

Aims and Description

Natural History will be a hybrid text made up of short stories, flash essays, poems, aphoristic fragments and illustrations that investigate the problematic intersection of science and art in the American Museum of Natural History. The second part and the centerpiece of a planned trilogy of ekphrastic hybrid texts on what happens when science attempts to describe the world through art, *Natural History* will be both a celebration of these efforts for their beauty and a critique of the failure that is inherent in any attempt to represent the world. The text of *Natural History* will be specifically crafted to evoke the shape and experience of the museum, blurring representational lines. Drawing on the lives of the people behind the museum's creation, their intentions, their biases, most notably those of Theodore "TR" Roosevelt, Jr., will add human drama to the museum's space. Throughout all of this I enter the work as both passive and active participant, an isolated visitor in the microcosm for the world that is the museum.

Conceptual Background

When scientists attempt to express their ideas through art the results are often irresponsible and gorgeous: two terms that I think describe all great art. The American Museum of Natural History is one of the premier scientific and cultural institutions of the world, but it doesn't have a reputation for presenting art or being a work of art itself. Its stated goal is "to discover, interpret, and disseminate information about human cultures, the natural world, and the universe" through exhibition (AMNH). This is mostly done through the use of displays, scale modeling, dioramas, and taxidermy, but the museum also contains sculptures, murals, commercial products, and cultural artifacts that can

often also be found in art museums. I believe these displays, their selection, presentation and combination qualify the museum as a text to be addressed the same way any work of art is addressed in literature—through ekphrasis.

I believe that ekphrasis can bridge criticism and art, and that in the case of the museum, a critical ekphrasis is imperative. Postmodernists have attacked the sciences for claiming to present objective truths independent of cultural constraints or ideologies (Butler 38); as a scientific institution the American Museum of Natural History claims that kind of objectivity, and goes further by presenting that viewpoint in pseudo-artistic contexts. I want to expose those areas where the museum reveals its subjectivity in displays that present pre-conceived attitudes towards sex, race and class. Ekphrasis works well for this goal because it acknowledges a relativism the sciences cannot: like science ekphrasis describes phenomena that exist in the world, but any claim of objectivity in doing so is really only a pose. *Natural History*, as my critique, will explore what I see, what I love and what I am not able to love about the museum.

Natural History will be the second part of a planned trilogy of books devoted to the ekphrasis of scientific-artistic works. The first part of the trilogy is my book *The Voyager Record*, forthcoming in 2016 from Rose Metal Press. Though the two parts are related, I do not want to write *Natural History* in the mold of *The Voyager Record*. *Natural History* and *The Voyager Record* are meant to stand on their own. The central metaphor in *The Voyager Record* was exteriority: one record attempting to summarize all of human experience on a spacecraft endlessly travelling in deep space standing for the self exploring the world. In contrast, in the museum, large, darkly-lit rooms that seem to expand endlessly and contain the entire natural world exist behind a bulwark of thick

stone blocks that never stop millions of people from walking in and out every year: a metaphor for interiority. Where *The Voyager Record* was set in space, *Natural History* will be grounded on Earth: the pieces in *Natural History* will appear more lush than those in *The Voyager Record*, where an ample amount of space—literal empty space—took up the page. *Natural History* will vary its use of text and generally appear more crowded and maximalist. Despite these stylistic choices I will maintain an affinity between the two texts through the use of the hybrid form.

In describing their forthcoming book, *Family Resemblance: An Anthology and Exploration of Hybrid Literary Genres*, Marcela Sulak and co-writer Jacqueline Kolosov say that hybrid literary texts are “individual works of art that cannot be replicated or perhaps even imitated, because they themselves do not replicate any previously existing pattern, structure or idea. Rather, they take features from multiple parents—multiple literary genres—and mix them to create a new entity” (Sulak). Natural history is a sort of hybrid science itself, made up of many branches of study. By interpreting the American Museum of Natural History through the lens of various genres—mainly through fictional prose poems and prose fragments, but also through traditional short stories, poetic forms, drawings and nonfiction flash essays—a text that is as piecemeal as the museum and the science it embodies will be created. Through hybridity *Natural History* will emulate its subject both in form and content.

Natural History will take an especially close look at the museum’s dioramas—the displays of taxidermied animals placed within realistically painted landscapes and staged environments. In one way, *Natural History* will appear to look like a modernization of the Mediaeval *bestiarum vocabulum*, but because of the human element involved in

viewing these objects in place, as an escape, it will function more like a series of pastorals—though not a pastoral without qualifications. The museum offers escape into a natural world, yet the feel is wrong, given the context of seeing outdoors scenes in dark, heavily constructed rooms. The living narratives presented in the dioramas offer a seeming life, one that any observer can equally associate with unseemingly death. A dichotomy is created by the diorama where an ideal natural world is offered to a viewer who stands detached and unnatural on the other, enclosed side of the glass. Yet that viewer is a more natural object than the taxidermy in the dioramas, which are artful facsimiles of life created by arraying dead shapes and using illusionary painting techniques to suggest lush environments. The “natural history” on view in the museum is very unnatural. Each diorama asks the viewer to engage it as a pastoral text, a text that unravels as soon as the viewer steps back and sees the frame around the glass, or the point in the sky where the corners of the room join together.

Poet Joyelle McSweeney’s concept of the necropastoral applies here. McSweeney says necropastoral “denaturalizes the pastoral by focusing on its always/already unnatural qualities” (“Some Versions of the Necropastoral”) and it “suggests that there is no wall between ‘nature’ and ‘manmade’ but only a membrane, that each element can bore through this membrane to spread its poisons, its death to the other” (“Bug Time”). Necropastoral describes a morbid anti-pastoral. It is an apt term to describe *Natural History*, where one of its recurring sections will be “Dead Animal Log”: an actual record of dead animals I have seen in the street and elsewhere. However, the dioramas provoke more than morbid fascination. In *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, Rachel Poliquin says “all taxidermy is deeply marked by human longing. Far

more than just death and destruction, taxidermy always exposes the desires and daydreams surrounding human relationships with and within the natural world” (Poliquin 6). It is this kind of imaginary longing that I hope to capture in *Natural History*. If what Poliquin says of dioramas is true, “if taxidermy is the use of animals for looking and the knowledge that comes from looking, it is no longer entirely clear what we are looking at” (“Dioramas: Destruction or Exaltation”), I want to offer a possible solution: we see stories.

Natural History will also draw on the events of the museum’s history from a variety of sources, such as *Dinosaurs in the Attic* by Douglas J. Preston, *A Gathering of Wonders* by Joseph Wallace, and the retrospective *American Museum of Natural History: 125 Years of Expedition and Discovery* by Lyle Rexer and Rachel Klein. Investigating the museum means exposing these individuals’ intentions and their biases and how the drama of their lives plays out within the institution. In the American Museum of Natural History no one figure looms larger—literally—than the 26th President of the United States, Theodore “TR” Roosevelt, Jr., whose massive likeness can be found throughout the museum grounds, most notably in the racially disturbing *Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt* by James Earle Fraser.

Natural History draws on the work of many writers for inspiration. The *bricolage* novels of David Markson—*Reader’s Block*, *This Is Not a Novel*, *Vanishing Point* and *The Last Novel*—were major influences on *The Voyager Record* and continue to be so in *Natural History*. What Markson said of his *bricolage* style through his autobiographical stand-in, Novelist, in *The Last Novel* also applies to how *Natural History* will operate: “For all its seeming fragmentation, nonetheless obstinately cross-referential and of

cryptic interconnective syntax” (Markson 51). Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* was the first book that made me aware of the possibilities of writing a long work made up of recurring and poetic prose fragments. *Natural History* uses Calvino’s strategy of using recurring titles for related sections in *Invisible Cities*. Adam Golaski’s *Color Plates*, called “a museum of stories,” takes sixty-three paintings by famous Impressionists and spins a little story—a “plate”—for each one of them. The irony is that this book contains no actual plates but the stories themselves, much as *Natural History* will lack any representation of the displays and dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History (with the exception of the “Gift Shop” illustrations). The use of concrete poetry in “The Whale” and each “Diorama” owes much to the work of Apollinaire and Gregory Corso’s “Bomb.”

Shape of the Work

The structure of the narrative in *Natural History* will be interconnective. Themes will be introduced and then recur isochronously throughout the work. As a reader progresses, frames of reference will develop and allow the reader to identify and pick up topics that will not have been addressed for many pages. Style, voice, and tone will vary from piece to piece, and within themes. To help unify such disparate narrative threads, all sections dealing with the same theme will be given the same title. This will create a rubric for the reader to easily sort each fragment into the larger structure of *Natural History*. This technique was used by Italo Calvino in *Invisible Cities*, and can help the reader structure and organize a text that is made up of interconnected pieces. But on another level, these titles are meant to emulate the museum environment, a place where every display bears a

title, and every display contains an additional wall label text which has titles of its own. In its widest sense, taxonomy is one of the main goals of scientific inquiry— like “taxidermy,” it also comes from the Ancient Greek word *tassein* “to arrange,” and ultimately from the PIE root **tag-* “to set aright”— in *Natural History* science is appropriated for literature, which means the act of titling functions like a poetic taxonomy, and judgmentally sets the world “right.”

“Diorama” will be a title given to multiple one-page pieces. All together these pieces will make up most of *Natural History*: it is my intention to include one “Diorama” piece for every one of the animal dioramas in the museum. Each “Diorama” will have a thick paragraph structure, in order to emulate, like a concrete poem, the shape of the glass enclosures containing these illusive wildernesses. These blocks of text will have justified margins, be single-spaced and lack paragraph breaks, so that the “Dioramas” will visually tax the reader’s eye and crowd the page, creating an earthy, claustrophobic space.

“Frieze,” an introductory poem, will sharply contrast the ideals of the museum with the datedness of its presentation. “Frieze” takes the words engraved along the frieze flanking the stairs leading to the museum’s main entrance (ideas such as “Truth,” “Knowledge,” “Wisdom,” “Loyalty,” “Honor”) and juxtaposes them with a description of *Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt* by James Earle Fraser found at the top of the stairs: a heroic, horse-riding Teddy Roosevelt being clung to by stereotypical depictions of an African American and a Native American. The statue dates from 1940.

“The Whale” will be the longest single piece in *Natural History*, and the most experimental in form. Its focus is the iconic blue whale model found in the Milstein Hall of Ocean Life in the museum. It will be a concrete poem, stretching across the top half of

multiple pages, like a textual whale hanging above the rest of the page, where “Dioramas” for those in the Milstein Hall will be found in a smaller point font, dwarfed by the Whale. To read “The Whale” the reader will have to flip back and forth through multiple pages as its sentences will continue not vertically, but horizontally onto each next page until the last page of the piece, at which point they will wrap around back to the first page of the piece. This will emulate the experience of looking at the blue whale model, something that can’t be done without circling it because of its massive size.

“Gift Shop” will be a recurring series of four or more simple pen and ink line drawings that will illustrate the commercial aspect of the museum. As drawings, the seductive nature of these objects—toy dinosaurs, astronaut ice cream—will be highlighted, stressing how such objects create desire in children which coerces their parents to spend money. These drawings’ visibility will threaten to draw the reader’s attention away from the rest of the text, just as consumerism in the form of souvenir shops seems to take away from purely educational concerns of the museum. “Gift Shop” also raises the question of whether or not it is possible in a capitalistic society for science to have any other goal than to create, support and induce forms of consumption. Rendering these objects in realistic, simplified style, and isolated on the page, they will become found objects, a visual poetry weighted with the semantic load of *Natural History*.

“Dead Animal Log” will be spread out throughout the text, constantly reminding the reader that I am actively involved with nature and the natural world, that there is a natural world outside of the natural history museum walls, one that is often as equally full

of dead creatures. Unapproachable life in nature will be contrasted with the irony that our knowledge of natural science is largely based in death.

“Allegory” will be a traditional short story told in first person. In it, a disgruntled and intuitively intelligent man who works as a janitor at the museum comes home to find his own trash strewn in the front of his apartment building. The musings he has while trying to uncover why this happens, and what happens when he finds the culprit (a raccoon) will be an allegory for my reasons for writing *Natural History*, a kind of narrative thesis statement.

Bibliography

American Museum of Natural History. American Museum of Natural History, 2013.

Web. Accessed August 25, 2013.

Apollinaire, Guillaume. *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War*. Tans. Anne Hyde Greet. Berkley: University of California Press, 1991. Print.

Butler, Christopher. *Postmodernism*. A Very Short Introduction 74. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print

Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt, 1974. Print.

Corso, Gregory. “Bomb.” N.d. Web. <<http://www.litkicks.com/Texts/Bomb.html>>. Accessed August 31, 2013.

Markson, David. *The Last Novel*. N.p.: Shoemaker & Hoard. 2007. Print.

McSweeney, Joyelle. “Some Versions of the Necropastoral: Plath’s *Ariel*.” *Montevidayo*, Action Books. January 14, 2011. Web.

- <http://www.montevidayo.com/necropastoral-2-plaths-ariel/>>. Accessed August 29, 2013.
- . "Bug Time: Chitinous Necropastoral Hypertime against the Future" *Montevidayo*, Action Books. November 1, 2011. Web. <<http://www.montevidayo.com/bug-time-chitinous-necropastoral-hypertime-against-the-future/>>. Accessed August 29, 2013.
- Poliquin, Rachel. *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*. Animalibus: Of Animals and Cultures 1. University Park: Penn State Press, 2012. Print.
- . "Dioramas: Destruction or Exaltation" *Ravishing Beasts*, Rachel Poliquin, December 1, 2007. Web. <<http://www.ravishingbeasts.com/what-to-think/2007/12/1/dioramas-destruction-or-exaltation.html>>. Accessed August 29, 2013.
- Preston, Douglas J. *Dinosaurs in the Attic: An Excursion into the American Museum of Natural History*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. Print.
- Rexer, Lyle, and Rachel Klein. *American Museum of Natural History: 125 Years of Expedition and Discovery*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995. Print.
- Sulak, Marcela, and Jacqueline Kolosov. *Family Resemblance: An Anthology and Exploration of Hybrid Literary Genres*. 2013. Letter to the author. August 25, 2013.
- Wallace, Joseph. *A Gathering of Wonders: Behind the Scenes at the American Museum of Natural History*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. Print.