Sibylle Grimbert's *Le Dernier des siens*: Imagining the Solitude of the Last Great Auk

JONATHAN KRELL

Abstract: The great auk, once numbering in the millions across the North Atlantic, disappeared in 1844. Cherished by sailors for their meat, oil, eggs, and feathers, they were easily slaughtered because of their inability to fly. Grimbert's *Le Dernier des siens* is a poignant tale imagining a friendship between the last great auk and the fictional French anthropologist who saves it from a massacre off the coast of Iceland. The novel explores the relationship between humans and nature in three ways. First, it investigates early theories of extinction proposed by naturalists Georges Cuvier and Charles Lyell. Second, the intense inter-species friendship between the anthropologist and the great auk illustrates current views on a hybrid nature, especially the idea of "hybrid communities" proposed by Dominique Lestel. And third, the immense solitude of the two main characters facing the absurdity of extinction evokes the great literary myths of Sisyphus, Ulysses, Frankenstein, and Robinson Crusoe.

Keywords: Sibylle Grimbert, Great auk, *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique*, *Frankenstein*, Dominique Lestel, being-for-others, *The Sixth Extinction*

> You lived by mounts and waves, in water, on water, under water.[1]
> —Jean-Luc Porquet, *Lettre au dernier grand pingouin* 13

> To take flight, far off! I sense that somewhere the birds
> Are drunk to be amid strange spray and skies.
> —Stéphane Mallarmé, "Brise marine"

In 1844, the last two known specimens of *Pinguinus impennis* were strangled to death on Eldey, a flat-topped rocky island off the southwest coast of Iceland. It was the end of a species that had once numbered in the millions, roaming the North Atlantic from Norway to Newfoundland, and at one time even as far south as Italy and Florida (Kolbert 57-58). Known as the great auk in English and the *grand pingouin* in French, *Pinguinus impennis* resembled penguins in many ways:[2] although they were superb swimmers, they were slow and clumsy on land and, equipped with tiny wings, they could not fly. They were thus easy targets for sailors and settlers of the North Atlantic, who coveted them for their meat, feathers, and eggs, slaughtering them mercilessly[3] and finally wiping them off the face of the earth at their last refuge, the remote and inhospitable Eldey.

Against this cruel history of the annihilation of a species, Sibylle Grimbert invents a heartbreaking tale of the relationship between a young French anthropologist, Gus, and what turns out to be the last of the great auks. Gus has been sent by the natural history museum of Lille in 1835 to study the flora and fauna of the North Atlantic. He witnesses a massacre of great auks on Eldey and manages to rescue one and take him back to Orkney, one of the Northern Isles of Scotland, where Gus is based. What follows is a hyperborean Atlantic odyssey. Gus and the auk he names Prosp (short for Prosperous) depart Orkney for Denmark's Faroe Islands in order to escape greedy Orkneyan sailors who seek to kill Prosp for his collector's value, since it is already known that the species is endangered. In an effort

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to reintroduce Prosp to others of his rapidly disappearing kind, Gus sails to St. Kilda, the westernmost island of Scotland's Outer Hebrides and the last bastion of the auks in Great Britain. However, the auks of St. Kilda reject the solitary and partially domesticated seabird, who appears doomed to never reunite with his fellow auks. Gus later moves with his wife, family, and Prosp to Denmark, where he has accepted a teaching position at the University of Copenhagen. He begins to realize that he may be witnessing an event he cannot fully comprehend: the last years of the last member of a species about to disappear forever. Finally, in a desperate and futile attempt to find other colonies of great auks, in 1849 (four years after what we know now as the extinction of the species) Gus sails with Prosp to the remote West Fjords of Iceland, where the novel ends. Prosp swims away, never to return, and Gus, after years of solitary mourning in Iceland, finally accepts the fact that Prosp was truly the last of his kind.

Le Dernier des siens [The last of its kind] won the 2023 François Sommer Literary Prize, which rewards "a work—novel or essay—that explores the relationships between humans and nature" ("Prix littéraire François Sommer"). Grimbert's novel explores the human/nature relationship in several ways. First of all, the disappearance of the great auk is a prime example of human-caused extinction, an ecological crisis known today as the sixth mass extinction,[4] a cataclysm brought about solely by human actions. Secondly, the analysis of the rapport between Gus and Prosp, which begins as a power struggle and evolves into a deep friendship, illustrates the hybridity of all objects in the world and the end of the divide between nature and human, a concept studied in France by such philosophers as Françoise Dastur, Jacques Derrida, Catherine and Raphaël Larrère, Bruno Latour, Dominique Lestel, and Michel Serres. Finally, the novel is a reflection on the psychological effects of solitude. Prosp is portrayed as a solitary hero, an avian Ulysses searching for his home and his countrymen after a long and painful absence. Gus, on the other hand, is a sincere but troubled antihero, and his years of solitude in the desolate and harsh climate of western Iceland transform him into a Robinson Crusoe of the frozen north, ravaged by loneliness, losing his ability to speak, and slipping into madness.

The unnatural extinction of the great auk

In the nineteenth century, there were two opposing theories of extinction. The French naturalist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832), who "discovered" extinction early in the century (Kolbert 36), held an "essentially tragic vision of earth history [that] has come to seem prophetic" (25). His theory of extinction holds that species disappear because of sudden cataclysmic events, like the great floods recounted in many ancient myths (45), and has come to be known as "catastrophism." A competing theory, "uniformitarianism," proposed notably by the English geologist Charles Lyell (1797-1895), claims that extinctions, like other changes on the earth, happen gradually and changes that occurred in prehistory are still active today. Examples of such processes are "sedimentation, erosion, and vulcanism" (48). Lyell had a profound influence on Charles Darwin, although he only "grudgingly accepted" (54) Darwin's theory of natural selection. Darwin disagreed with Cuvier's catastrophism, but greatly admired his older colleague Lyell, whose ideas allowed for the possibility of human-caused extinction: "In one of the many passages [of *On the Origin of Species*] in which [Darwin] heaps scorn on the catastrophists, he observes that animals inevitably become rare before they become extinct: 'we know this has been the progress of events with those animals which have been exterminated, either locally or wholly, through man's agency'" (Darwin qtd. in Kolbert 68). Darwin explains extinction by natural selection, not cataclysms. And he sees humans as merely a part of nature, with no superior standing: "Humans, just like any other species, were descended, with modification, from more ancient forbears" (Kolbert 69). Human-caused extinction challenges Darwinism. The annihilation of the great auk—like that of countless other species—is a decidedly unnatural selection. As Elizabeth Kolbert explains, Cuvier was correct about catastrophism; humans are the current flood, volcano, or asteroid that is altering earth history: "Either there had to be a separate category for human-caused extinction, in which case people really *did* deserve their 'special

status' as a creature outside of nature, or space in the natural order had to be made for cataclysm, in which case, Cuvier—distressingly—was right" (69).

Grimbert's protagonist Gus is aware of the two competing theories of extinction. At first he believes that the idea of a species disappearing is absurd. Observing nature and its "earthly profusion, . . . the miracle of these infinitely varied forms, which seemed to respond to a secret order, . . . driven by an internal mechanism" (Grimbert 65), Gus concludes that the natural world is too perfectly ordered to allow extinctions to occur. But then he reads an article by Cuvier on the extinction of the dodo (94) which, like the great auk, made the evolutionary "decision" not to fly, and thus became vulnerable to predators, especially humans. The resemblance between the fates of the two species is too obvious to ignore, but Gus stubbornly refuses to acknowledge it:

> But no, the dodo was an exception, an accident; animals do not disappear, he immediately thought. The earth is nothing less than profusion. Of course, long ago, the mammoth and megalonyx . . . became extinct. Of course, animals doubtlessly change; catastrophes kill them or, sometimes, because conditions around them change, one species becomes more adaptable and proliferates while another weakens. But nature, so well-oiled, so balanced, prevents the disappearance of that which is not harmful to man. . . . But nevertheless, logically, what diminishes can disappear. Except that was unimaginable. When this idea came to him, Gus had the impression that he was up against a wall. Nothing here on earth, in this general harmony, could be wiped out. (94–95)

Gus cannot accept the logical fact that a species that "diminishes can disappear." This is probably what actually happened to the great auk. Elizabeth Kolbert writes that even if every last auk was not killed off by human beings, perhaps "the slaughter simply reduced the colony to the point that it became vulnerable to other forces" (Kolbert 61). She attributes this to an ecological phenomenon called the "Allee effect," which holds that individuals are healthier in a dense population and weaker in a sparse population where it is more difficult to find protection against predators or a suitable mate, for example.

Gus's refusal to admit the possibility of modern catastrophic extinctions is reinforced when he reads Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830). However, Lyell's theories do not seem to apply to the great auk. Lyell explains extinctions of species in several non-catastrophic ways: inability to adapt to an altered environment, competition with another species, and the propensity of humans to eradicate pests or species they consider harmful. The great auk faces none of these problems. Neither the climate nor the habitat of the bird have substantially changed; it is fast enough to escape its common sea predators, like seals or orcas; and it lives too far from most humans to be a nuisance to them. Yet humans are responsible for their diminishing numbers. Gus wonders if "human error" can apply to theories of extinction: "I don't understand. So could it be that we, human beings, have made a mistake?" (114). He concludes that the great auk's plight is a conundrum that cannot be solved: "Gus felt that he grasped the nature of the wall before him: the injustice that victimized the great auk could not be understood because the very essence of the injustice was that it was inexplicable" (114).

A hybrid community

The inter-species friendship between the anthropologist and the auk in *Le Dernier des siens* reflects the hybrid character of the world and the questioning of the human-animal boundary that Françoise Dastur calls "a true philosophical revolution" (Dastur 9). Michel Serres, for example, evokes the new "world-object," born when the industrial revolution "propagated thermal techniques which accelerated the rise of the local towards the global. . . . By world-objects I mean tools with a dimension that is commensurable with one of the dimensions of the world. A satellite for speed, an atomic bomb for energy, the Internet for space, and nuclear waste for time…these are four examples of world-objects" ("Revisiting the Natural Contract"). Another example is Catherine and Raphaël Larrère, who herald the end of "the great divide" (Larrère and Larrère 93), the "abyss of essence," in the words of Heidegger (357), that had always separated humans from and elevated them above the rest of

nature. Furthermore, Larrère and Larrère maintain that nature includes "hybrid objects that activate natural processes but, moreover, all the goods we produce, all the by-products we discard" (Larrère and Larrère 163). But specifically concerning animality, Dominique Lestel is probably the most important theorist of the "hybrid communities" ("Hybrid Communities" 62) shared by humans and animals, as Keith Moser asserts: "Lestel exposes the porosity of the boundaries that is emblematic of a shared life with other sentient, semiotic creatures with whom we dwell in what he refers to as *hybrid communities* or *mixed societies*" (189; italics in the text).

Gus is intrigued by the hybrid nature of the auk itself. Is it a bird that cannot fly or a fast-swimming fish that must come out of the water to breathe? This animal is anomalous: "He had a hard time believing that it was a bird. For him, at that moment, it seemed more like a kind of fish that only breathed out of water, or a goose that could swim, a chimera with feathers for scales, frail wings, a bird of prey's beak that was probably also useless. An anomaly, in short" (31).

The sailors of Orkney, some of whom participated in the slaughter of the great auks that opens the novel, view with suspicion and indignation Gus's animal companion. They all maintain that "animals should be sold, eaten, or else they should work" (62). Moreover, the sailors may have shared the superstitious belief of many Scottish islanders that great auks could be witches. Andrew Fleming reports that five men killed the last great auk in Great Britain on St. Kilda Island in 1840. It was a collective "ritual killing" (Fleming 32), a "twofold death" (33) in which the bird—thought to be a witch that had conjured up a storm—was beaten with a stick and then crushed between two stones. The Scottish islands are apparently no place for auks or pets, so Gus leaves for the Faroe Islands, a territory of Denmark situated between Iceland and Norway.

In his new home, Gus finds a locale much more hospitable to his studies and to his strange animal companion. His household is a living example of Lestel's "hybrid communities." Rather than speak of what *distinguishes* humans from animals, Lestel emphasizes the importance of "relations" and "reciprocal attachment" ("Hybrid Communities" 70), "passages," "ties," "communication or communion" (65) between them, and their "capacity to share meaning" (71). Humans cannot be studied without considering the animal question: "conceptualizing the human in the texture of animality" (65), combining ethology and ethnology into a new discipline of "etho-ethnology" (Lestel, *L'Animal singulier* 16).

Le Dernier des siens is an admirable illustration of Lestel's theory. At first Gus only feels "responsible" (Grimbert 49) for the great auk he had snatched out of its natural milieu. With time, they become "friends" (58), and Gus realizes that the animal trusts him: "A living being was surrendering to him, a creature he had torn from its existence trusted him" (59). The two enter into a "contract of trust,"[5] a key element of the hybrid community. "Bonds of familiarity, relations made by 'negotiation' and connections that are established on a principle of responsibility constitute the pillars of the contracts of trust binding humans and animals within hybrid communities" (Lestel, *L'Animal singulier* 26).

At this point Gus gives the great auk a name, differentiating him from the rest of his kind. He now sees Prosp as an individual he has a duty to protect, rather than an anonymous member of a species. His action recalls Derrida's insistence that in order to preserve animals from violence, "animal" in the "general singular" must cease to exist: "I would like to have the plural *animals* heard in the singular. There is no Animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single, indivisible limit. . . . From the outset there are animals and, let's say, *l'animot*" (Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* 48; italics in the text).

Over the years, the relationship between Gus and Prosp truly takes on a hybrid nature, founded on a certain "complicity" (in the positive French sense, meaning a tacit or secret agreement) between them. Lestel writes that the "the human/animal relationship leads . . . to a certain kind of *complicity* that is often extremely gratifying for the human" (*L'Animal singulier* 27; italics in the text). Gus realizes this to be true; his relationship with Prosp is more rewarding than any he has had with a human being: "Gus understood that the presence of each one comforted the other, and that they

shared more complicity than either would have with companions of their own species" (Grimbert 152). As they walk on the beach in the Faroe Islands, Gus "had the impression that the two were combined, that each was an extension of the other. . . . He thought he had acquired the mind of a great auk. He believed he could feel what Prosp felt." . . . "Gus suddenly felt he had become a great auk, thinking and feeling things like Prosp" (75, 130). As the human and non-human animal evolve into a mutual dependence, the novel inevitably slips into anthropomorphism, or even zoomorphism, as Prosp seems to think that Gus is one of his kind. At times Prosp acts like a spoiled, "capricious" and "demanding" (135) child. But normally Gus is overwhelmed by the modesty, kindness, respect, and tenderness that the animal shows to him and his wife and children. Sometimes, at night, Gus "found that his animal's face expressed melancholy. Except that, he told himself, it could well be his own melancholy that he attributed to an animal gazing vacantly into space, his eyes hazy and staring" (135). When his melancholy becomes impossible to bear—like when he watches a razorbill,[6] a smaller version of himself, take off from the ice and fly into the air—Prosp even seems to cry like a human (168).

When Gus and Prosp sail to a desolate spot in northwest Iceland in 1849 in a last attempt to find other great auks, their transformation is complete. As Gus gradually slips into madness, he feels that he is no longer completely human and Prosp is no longer entirely penguin. They have become a "hybrid species" (160), a mythological "griffin" (156) or "chimera" (160); twin beings fused into one, the stuff of age-old legends: "They were like two madmen taken from the surrounding society, two magical beings from the time of Merlin the Enchanter, secluded deep in a forest that no one could penetrate; two memories of an ancient and lost time when all living things were equal, where Prosp, because he was living, resembled Gus" (167).

Two heroes of solitude

As Prosp's hybrid nature is described in mythological terms, so too is his solitary existence as the last of his kind. He is Ulysses after the Trojan War, a lonely hero at the mercy of the gods, wandering the seas in search of home. When Gus sails with him to St. Kilda to meet other great auks and hopefully find a mate, a joyful Prosp is ready to play the role of hero: "The closer they came to St. Kilda, the more Prosp puffed out his chest, . . . he walked majestically on the bridge" (99). The other auks on the island are at first intrigued, and they all "turned their heads toward this newcomer, this Ulysses of the auks back home again" (101). Unfortunately for Prosp, no faithful Penelope awaits his return, and he has no arrows to fend off the males of the island. The auks attack him and banish him from the colony. Prosp is a broken hero, no longer majestic, and the narrator tries to imagine "the sorrow, the desolation and the shame felt by a humiliated animal, without friends, without a future" (107). Prosp is "the loneliest animal on earth . . . , Ulysses lost forever on the outskirts of Ithaca" (108–09). Nevertheless, he is still a hero, albeit a tragic one: "Thus, this creature unique in the world . . . had an exceptional destiny, to be a hero, a survivor, an experience that no other great auk would ever know" (109). As they cross the ocean toward Iceland, which turns out to be their final destination, Gus realizes the immensity of Prosp's heroic destiny: "A creature with a unique destiny: the last to know the sensations, language, and instinct of its kind, the only one in all the non-eternity of great auks to remember the more than one hundred thousand years they had just spent on the earth" (158).

Throughout the novel, Gus is just as alone as Prosp. The absurdity of his situation—caring for an animal on the verge of extinction—inspires him to meditate on the indifference of the universe toward its creatures. As he wanders alone at twilight on the beach, he is overcome by the unwelcoming nature of the ocean that had become the center of his life: "The desert, he believed, must resemble the sea; this void, or this place full of matter that was not made for man, this space that could not care less if humans were happy there or not pierced him through. . . . Suddenly, human beings had lost their importance in this world that breathed alone, by itself, in this universe indifferent to his presence" (92–93). Gus embodies the loneliness of the absurd man facing an indifferent world described by

Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "[M]an stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (28). The absurd man comes to the realization that, like any other creature or object, his existence is utterly contingent, non-essential: "If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity" (51; italics in the text). Gus becomes aware of the futility of his desire to save Prosp and his kind from their impending extinction. Nevertheless, he continues his quest, sailing from island to island in search of great auks, like a happy Sisyphus (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 123) pushing his rock up the mountain of Tartarus and making the most of his "wretched condition" (121).

If Prosp is the true hero of the novel, Gus is the antihero, and, besides Sisyphus, he has two other mythical namesakes: Frankenstein and Robinson Crusoe. When Gus's wife Elinborg complains of his constant obsession with his work and with Prosp—being married to science—he compares himself to Victor Frankenstein, overwhelmed by the enormity of his project, not to create life, but to save an entire species from destruction: "He told her about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. . . . He wasn't going to invent a new man, he explained, but he shared with the mad scientist an obsession with something immense, as immense as humanity or perhaps the creation of the world" (Grimbert 110–11). She begins to call him "Frankenstein," and refers to his office as a laboratory. The narrator compares Gus to the "mad scientist," foreshadowing his descent into madness in the final pages of the novel. He comes to believe that he—creator of the "domestic auk" (123)—resembles Frankenstein more than he had thought: "[L]ike Frankenstein, he had created a being that would be forever alone, frightening to his fellows, misunderstood by humans" (123).

In his "*Frankenstein* and the Origin and Extinction of Species," Alan Bewell discloses the nature of the loneliness suffered by Victor Frankenstein's diabolical creation. He reminds us that ideas of evolution were on Shelley's mind as she wrote her novel. The very first sentence of her "Preface" to *Frankenstein* declares her debt to Charles Darwin's grandfather Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802): "The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr. Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence" (Shelley 7). Forty-one years before Charles Darwin will publish *On the Origin of Species*, "Shelley was already writing a history of the origin and extinction of a species" (Bewell 509). Influential biologists of the time, notably the French naturalist Buffon, believed that sexual reproduction "was . . . understood as being the primary means of distinguishing species" (520). If a being cannot reproduce, it is not a member of a species. Therein lies the creature's desperation: "Lacking the ability to reproduce his likeness, the being created by Victor is not a species" (520). The creature demands that Victor create a female companion for him: "I am alone, and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects. This being you must create" (Shelley 105). Victor begins to work on the creation of a female partner for the monster, but fearing that "a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth . . . [he] thought with a sensation of madness on [his] promise of creating another like to him, and trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which [he] was engaged" (125). For Bewell "[t]he scene in which Victor destroys and scatters the remains of the female being while her male companion looks on in torment is one of the most terrible scenes in Romantic literature . . . : it is a murder, an abortion, a gender-driven hate crime" (Bewell 522). This brutal act condemns Victor's creature to extinction. His "intense sorrow" (522) parallels that of Prosp the great auk, another creature that is the last of its kind. The monster's pain "speaks for many natures existing before and after him, in knowing that he is the last of his species, one that was destroyed before it even had the chance to be born" (522).[7]

Gus's obsession with the great auk, his "friend" (58, 134, 175) takes him far from his beloved France, which he misses deeply: "Sometimes he thought of the south of France, of the purple lavender,

of the yellow rock of Périgord. . . . He was homesick for trees, forests, flat motionless prairies instead of the unstable, changing expanse of the sea" (124–25). In spite of his homesickness for the continent, he has become a seaman and an islander. Although married and a father, he often abandons his family for long periods of time as he sails with Prosp from one island to the next. A solitary hero of frozen islands, he is a Robinson Crusoe of the north.

Michel Tournier's classic version of the Robinson Crusoe myth, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* [*Friday*], recounts the almost three decades that Robinson lives on a desert island off the coast of Chile. He is the sole survivor of a shipwreck and lives alone for many years on the island he names Speranza, until he saves a young Indian who is about to be sacrificed by his fellow tribesmen. Tournier relates the deleterious effects of isolation on Robinson during his early years on the island, before the arrival of his new companion, whom he calls Vendredi (Friday).

Critics agree that the principle philosophical question in Tournier's novel is the consequence of the absence of others in one's existence (Bouloumié 45–50; Stirn 36–37). In a way, Robinson ceases to exist, because "it is others, those who are outside, who hold the key" (Tournier 122) to the true world. Robinson slips into bestiality, spending hours soaking in the mire with the wild pigs of the island and falling prey to hallucinations. Solitude, he writes in his journal, is "a corrosive influence which acts on me slowly but ceaselessly, and in one sense purely destructively. . . . I have noted with a horrid fascination the dehumanizing process which I feel to be inexorably at work within me" (53–54). He lacks what Sartre named "being-for-others" (*Being and Nothingness* 221–430), the gaze of others, who look on us as objects and help us form our identities. Robinson writes that others "represent attitudes, possible points of view, which enrich the picture for the outside observer by providing him with other, indispensable points of reference. But in Speranza there is only one viewpoint, my own" (Tournier 54). When he discovers a mirror in the shipwreck one day he is horrified that he can barely recognize himself; his face seems "disfigured" (86): "He realized that the face is the part of our flesh which is endlessly molded and remolded, warmed, animated by the presence of our fellows. . . . 'An expressionless face. A degree of extinction such as perhaps no human being has ever before undergone'" (86–87). Without human company he falls into madness and begins to lose the use of language (54). Once again, he laments in his journal: "My whole philosophy trembles. The disintegration of language is the most obvious sign of this erosion. . . . I note with every day that passes the collapse of whole sectors of that citadel of words within which our thought dwells. . . . I can only talk literally. Metaphors, litotes, and hyperbole call for an exaggerated effort of concentration" (66–67).

As François Stirn points out, even the arrival of Friday does not completely resolve the problem of the absence of the other, because from Robinson's perspective, Friday is never really human. At first he considers Friday a "savage," "less than human" (Stirn 36). Over the years, as he metamorphoses from firm belief in the Old Testament to a form of sun-worship, he comes to respect and love Friday as an almost god-like figure, "more than human" (36). When Friday abandons him and leaves the island on the English schooner *Whitebird*, the only ship that had appeared during Robinson's twenty-eight-year sojourn, he understands "that for an old man there is no greater affliction than solitude" (Tournier 231), and resolves to die. He is saved by the unexpected appearance of another person: Jaan, the unhappy cook's boy who, rather than suffer more abuse at the hands of the *Whitebird*'s sailors, jumped ship to stay on the island with Robinson. As the novel ends, Robinson decides to live on with his new companion, and renames the boy Sunday, the day of the sun.

If Tournier's Robinson Crusoe had the good fortune to be marooned on a lush and sunny tropical island in the South Pacific, Grimbert's Gus has no such luck. His realm is the North Atlantic, the cold rough seas dotted with forbidding islands that are awe-inspiring, stark, and sublime rather than beautiful. His last stop is the frozen northwest coast of Iceland. The narrator stresses the finality of this journey: "They were the only two, the last two: Gus the last man on earth who would see an auk, Prosp the last of his kind" (Grimbert 159). Like Crusoe submerged in the stagnant mire with wild pigs, Gus begins to lose his humanity, wondering which of the two creatures sharing his cabin was

human, and which was a great auk. Again like Crusoe, he does not recognize his image in the mirror: "Moreover, when he looked at himself in the mirror, Gus didn't recognize himself at all: his beard and his hair had grown and . . . no human skin was visible anymore. . . . Something had shredded his nerves, and he was unable to accomplish any more than routine activities: fish, sleep, and eat. . . . All the rest seemed useless" (160–61). And finally, Gus too begins to question his sanity as he loses the ability to speak: "No animal can be alone on earth, and no man either, thought Gus, or else he would become like him: he'd nod his head while uttering nonsense, then after a while he would lose his speech, and with a hiss he would speak to the leaves of the trees, to the dust, to the mice squeaking in the corners of his house" (169).

During the frigid winter, Prosp dives into the ocean and does not come back. Gus falls into depression and, sick with a raging fever, stops eating, and suffers from hallucinations during which he imagines conversations with Prosp. He is certain he will die, but Prosp finally returns, brings fish for him to cook, encourages him to live and helps him recover: "Now he had become Gus's doctor, and the master of the house" (167). Thus with Gus's dehumanization comes Prosp's humanization. The human condition has its price, however. When Prosp sees a razorbill flying and futilely tries to imitate it, his dejection is complete and he sobs desperately, "a heavy, deep sound, suspended in the air, a desperate sound" (168). He dives into the water and this time does not return. The reader wonders if Prosp simply swam off and died a natural death or, capable of the human emotion of melancholy, did he take his own life? As for Gus, he appears content to die in Iceland, making no attempt to leave and change his solitary existence. He mourns Prosp for two years. An old friend, Buchanan, finally arrives to take him home, speaking to him gently, as one would to a pet, rather than a man: "like a valued pet, a loyal dog to whom he would whistle to make him hurry up a little" (177). The novel ends with a hallucinatory passage recalling Rimbaud's "Le Bateau ivre," as Gus imagines a violent and surreal sea journey accompanied by people from his past and, of course, Prosp: "The fall was dizzying, a fall into nothing: the world after Prosp, thought Gus" (178).

Despite the contrast between their island environments—one tropical, one glacial—at the end of *Friday* and *Le Dernier des siens*, the protagonists' extreme "situations," as Sartre uses the term, are similar. For Sartre, "the paradox of freedom" is that "there is freedom only in a *situation*, and there is a situation only through freedom. Human-reality meets resistances and obstacles that it has not created everywhere, but these resistances and obstacles only have meaning in and through the free choice that human-reality *is*" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 489; italics in the text). When Robinson loses Friday and Gus loses Prosp, the relative solitude that they have always endured becomes complete and unbearable. Their Sartrean "free choice" is suicide, but in each case they are saved by a *deus ex machina* who miraculously appears on their island: Jaan gives Robinson a new reason to continue to live on Speranza and Buchanan arrives by ship to take Gus back to his family in Denmark.

The real hero of *Le Dernier des siens* is, of course, Prosp the great auk. In her fictional account of the extinction of the auk, Sibylle Grimbert weaves together the historical tragedy of human-driven extinction in the North Atlantic and a psychological tragedy of extreme solitude, from which both humans and animals can suffer. Commenting her novel, Grimbert underscores the "affection" and "love" between her two protagonists, and "the immense solitude of the one who is the last," which she calls "an absolutely abyssal idea" ("Sibylle Grimbert vous présente *Le Dernier des siens*"). "Abyssal" is the perfect adjective to describe the situation from which Gus and Prosp cannot extricate themselves, for not only is it an oceanographic term referring to the deepest zones of the ocean, it can also mean "unfathomable" or "inexplicable," like the questions this novel explores: How can human beings possibly disregard the fact that our actions are responsible for the most devastating mass extinction since the dinosaurs disappeared fifty million years ago? Can our hybrid communities actually include wild creatures like the great auk—animals who are not particularly affectionate (as are cats and dogs), particularly intelligent (as are dolphins and elephants), or whose DNA is not nearly identical to ours (like that of chimpanzees)? But perhaps the most troubling question of all is the one posed by

publisher Stephen Carrière, a query that is "as intimate as it is metaphysical": "what does it mean to love what will never be again?" ("Présentation de l'éditeur").

The University of Georgia, USA

Notes

[1] All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[2] Despite their appearance, great auks were not related to the penguins of the southern hemisphere: "Penguins constitute their own family, while auks are members of the family that includes puffins and guillemots; genetic analysis has shown that razorbills are the great auk's closest living relatives" (Kolbert 58).

[3] Great auks were often beaten to death or strangled. Elizabeth Kolbert and Jean-Luc Porquet both report two particularly cruel methods of killing the birds. Sometimes they were put into kettles and set on fire, their oily bodies kindling the flame. If the auks were being killed for their prized feathers, men would pluck them, and the auks would die a slow death (Kolbert 60; Porquet 27).

[4] Alternative names for the sixth mass extinction are the Holocene extinction or the Anthropocene extinction. Kolbert explains that the Holocene (meaning "wholly recent") is our current geological epoch, "which began at the conclusion of the last ice age, 11,700 years ago" (Kolbert 107). Anthropocene is the invention of the Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen, who wrote the following in "Geology of Mankind," published in *Nature* in 2002: "It seems appropriate to assign the term 'Anthropocene' to the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch" (Crutzen qtd. In Kolbert 108).

[5] Lestel's "contract of trust" echoes Michel Serres's plea for a "natural contract" to quell the violence that we are inflicting on not just animals, but all of nature (Serres, *Natural Contract* 10). Serres calls for an armistice between humans and nature, the enactment of "a natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favor of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation" (38).

[6] We have seen that razorbills (*Alca torda*) are the closest living relatives of the great auk. Smaller marine birds, they have survived because, able to fly and swim, they are better equipped to escape predators.

[7] *Le Dernier des siens* resembles Shelley's novel in other ways. Gus's adventure begins in the Orkney Islands; Orkney also plays an important role in *Frankenstein*. When Victor Frankenstein reluctantly agrees to perform the unspeakable task of creating a female companion for his murderous creature, he leaves Geneva "and fixed on one of the remotest of the Orkneys as the scene of [his] labours. It was a place fitted for such a work, being hardly more than a rock whose high sides were continually beaten upon by the waves. The soil was barren, scarcely affording pasture for a few miserable cows" (Shelley 123). Furthermore, the denouements of the two novels take place in similar environments. We have seen that *Le Dernier des siens* concludes in the snow and ice of the remotest part of Iceland, where Prosp disappears forever. Frankenstein likewise dies in the Arctic seas, pursuing his monster, "surrounded by mountains of ice, which admit of no escape" (160). The creature will also die there. The novel ends with his vow to perish by self-immolation on a funeral pyre, "and exult in the agony of the torturing flames" (168).

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