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How to Disappear Completely: Poetics of Extinction in Max Frisch's *Man in the Holocene*

WHAT CAN LITERATURE DO? You see, this question is like a stray dog in Central Park that you can't get rid of, and now I am trying once again to throw just any word far away, into the surroundings, so that this dog leaves me alone and goes looking for it, and maybe does not come back—For example, the word: UTOPIA.¹ (Frisch, *Schwarzes Quadrat* 60)

How to tell a valley? According to a letter from August 1972 that is the question that was driving the construction of Max Frisch's *Man in the Holocene* published in 1979 by Suhrkamp in Germany (Weidermann 316). Only months later, an English translation—interrupted by ads and caricatures—was published in *The New Yorker*. In retrospect, the author and architect Frisch stated that he would have liked the short narrative to be his last text, his literary legacy (Frisch, *Entwürfe* 58), underlining the poetological significance of this rather experimental piece of writing. As it challenges the anthropocentric notion of the novel governing Frisch's earlier works, *Man in the Holocene* can be regarded as an anti-novel.

The urge to exhaust a geological formation poetically is the point of entry for the following analysis.² *Man in the Holocene* reflects upon the possibilities and impossibilities of narration and its relation to the physical environment. In addition, the alpine surroundings provide the setting for encounters between animals (gnats, woodpeckers, and salamanders) and a moribund man.

¹ "WAS VERMAG LITERATUR? Sie sehen, die Frage ist wie im Central Park ein herrenloser Hund, den man nicht mehr loswird, und jetzt versuche ich es noch einmal, irgendein Wort weit in die Gegend zu werfen, damit dieser Hund mich verlässt und es sucht und vielleicht nicht zurückkommt—Zum Beispiel das Wort: UTOPIE." All following translations from the German are my own unless stated otherwise.

² Although Frisch's "late work" has not been extensively covered, I was able to draw from a number of inspiring analyses of *Man in the Holocene*, beginning with Kaiser's seminal reading. Sidestepping rather biographical and/or anthropocentric approaches that concentrate on the topics of aging and/or death (Goetz, Battiston, Roszbacher) as well as Schmenk's insightful focus on the archive, this chapter draws heavily on Braungart's contribution focusing on literature and geology (Braungart).

I am using this coincidence of habitat, human, and non-human lifeforms as an opportunity to work through the relationship between zoopoetics and eco-poetics. I propose to describe this relationship as a dialectic of erosive effects provoked by an ecopoetic perspective on the one hand, and prosopopoetic effects elicited by a zoopoetic perspective on the other. Both effects are related to three variants of extinction: ontological (the removal of a species from its metaphysical position), poetological (the erasure of lifeforms from the text), and ecological (the termination of a group of organisms).

To make this hypothesis plausible, the narrative is approached from two different angles in this chapter, with both paths converging at the end. The first part examines how environmental conditions co-shape the text. Erosion is established as a formative force that challenges integral images of lifeforms and stresses material and semiotic flux and transport. The second part examines how animals are involved in the text as makers that “give a mask” to intangible and incomprehensible environmental processes. Both text and environment are construed as co-productions that involve an abundance of agents—not only human and not only animal.

Ecopoetic Approach: Formative Forces

An “ecopoetic approach” is ecocritical insofar as it pertains to the “study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty viii). However, the focus in this first part is less on the “political” “commitment to environmentality” (Buell 11), or ecology for that matter, of either the text or its reading. It is also not so much on the “phenomenological” question “in what respects a poem may be a making ... of the dwelling-place” (Bate 75). Rather, it aims to explore the part of the organic and inorganic environment (including animals, fungi, plants, minerals, liquids etc.) in the making (*poiesis*) of a literary text by considering the “capacity of things ... to act as quasi agents or forces” and thus accounting for “vibrant materiality” (Bennett viii). How do environmental conditions co-shape literature as formative forces?

The title originally intended for *Man in the Holocene* was more laconic and less anthropocentric: *Climate* (Schmitz 143). Although the title was altered, a bracketed remark still situates the text in a warming world and argues that literature must adapt to changing environmental conditions by abandoning certain narrative aspects, namely the focus on humans as individuals and in society:

(Novels are no use at all on days like these, since they deal with people and their relationships with themselves and others, with fathers and mothers and daughters and sons, lovers, etc., with individual souls, usually unhappy ones, with society, etc., as if the place for these things were assured, the earth for all time earth, the sea level fixed for all time.) (Frisch, *Holocene* 39)

Already by the end of the 1970s,³ reading and writing “as if ... the ‘sea level’ [were] fixed for all time” had become impossible. This basic assumption condenses the negative narrative program the text launches against a climatologically naïve poetics of the novel. But it does not stop at being merely programmatic; the text is not only reflexive but also puts this program into experimental practice.

In the narrative, a meteorological anomaly (ceaseless rainfalls) and its potential effects (mud slides) convert a Ticino village and its alpine surroundings into dangerous terrain. Simultaneously, both knowledge and memory of the aged character Geiser, who is cut off from the rest of the world in his cabin, are affected and degrading. There it is: a twofold story of erosion; erosion of rock, and erosion of mind.⁴ Rather anthropocentric readings hinge on the observation that Geiser’s fate is “mirrored” by his environment and go to work explicating the neat parable identified as the metaphoric core of the text (Stade). Yet, erosion is not only the subject or theme of the narrative; it also affects its form. *Man in the Holocene* is performative in the sense that it shows erosion at work as a literary and an epistemological practice; as a way to think, as a way to write, and as a way to think writing. The imaginary end of a drowning world is developed as a problem of form, and erosion is established as a formative force both destructive and creative.

A lexicon article pasted into the text⁵ almost at the end of the book reminds us that the Latin verb *erodere* roughly translates to “eat away” (Frisch,

³ By the end of the 1970s, climatologists had not yet reached a consensus regarding the question whether the earth was going to cool down or to heat up in the future, although the voices predicting global warming were more numerous. The diagnosis that scientists in the 1970s predominantly championed the idea of a cooling world seems to be a myth (Peterson, Connolley, and Fleck). In 1979—the same year Frisch’s narrative was published in German—the World Climate Conference held in Geneva, Switzerland, by the World Meteorological Organization highlighted the “all-pervading influence of climate on human society and on many fields of human activity and endeavor,” cautiously warning that it “appears plausible that an increased amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere can contribute to a gradual warming of the lower atmosphere” while conceding that the “details are still poorly understood” (World Meteorological Association 1).

⁴ Schmenk speaks of “erosions of knowledge” (“Wissenserrosionen”; 176).

⁵ On the archive as a prerequisite for Frisch’s narrative and its erosion, cf. also Schmenk.

Holocene 97), “gnaw” or “nibble.” Etymologically, “erosion” refers to a range of animal activities that became eponymic for an order of mammals, rodents (*rodentia*). Their natural technique of ingestion employs a single pair of sharp and constantly regenerating incisors as tools (aptly dubbed “chisel teeth”); and it shapes things by taking something away from them. As this transformation has often been considered harmful throughout (agri)cultural history, the verb can also mean “corrode,” “stain,” or “damage” in a figurative sense. The corresponding noun *erosio* is an expression used for cancer, thus pathologizing the negative implications of the metaphor. This connection is drawn upon in the narrative by frequently invoking Chestnut canker, a devastating disease caused by a species of fungi that wiped out 95% of the American chestnut population over the course of 8 years in the early 1900s and completely transformed the landscape. In 1948 a similar disease was diagnosed in Ticino (97).⁶ A note in the text remembers the extinction event in a laconic way, relating it to a catastrophic rise of the sea level and establishing a topographic axis of figural transport: “If the Arctic ice were to melt, New York would be under water, as would Europe, except for the Alps. /—Many chestnut trees are cankered” (77).

In the geological context, the term erosion designates the ablation of weathered rock and loose sediments, in other words: “the picking up or physical removal of rock particles by an agent such as ocean waves, running water, or glaciers” (Plummer, Carlson, and Hammersley 106). It is a process that carves out landscapes but also levels the land in the long run if it is not outbalanced by tectonic movement. It is a crucial phase of the so-called rock cycle that invokes deep-time geological processes putting human lifespans⁷ into perspective (51, 19, 201).

“Erosion is a slow process” (Frisch, *Holocene* 50). This is just one of many lapidary statements that structure the narrative. Its concise form (its lapidary style) can be traced to lapidary script, an early cultural technique of carving letters into marble or other stone. As the solid medium does not allow for a quick inscription process, words had to be chosen carefully

⁶ The ascomycete fungus *Cryphonectria parasitica* is considered the “causal agent of chestnut blight” and “was first observed in Europe in 1938 near Genova”. From Italy it spread to the rest of Europe. “Today only the scattered stands of chestnuts in the Netherlands and the coppice stands in southern UK are free of the blight” (Robin and Heiniger 361).

⁷ As of 2015, the global average of human healthy life expectancy amounted to 63.1 years, ranging from 50.1 years in Sierra Leone to 83.8 years in Japan. The second highest number, 83.4 years, was indicated for Switzerland (World Health Organization 2017, Appendix B).

and the wording had to be succinct. Consequently, Hettinger's entry in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* ("Historical Dictionary of Rhetoric") highlights the material base of writing in this respect: "Unlike laconism, lapidary style, according to its etymology, refers back to material aspects prior to its figurative semantic potential."⁸ In the same vein, Riley points to "the ways a literally material surface permits, or heavily influences, the style and then how that style profoundly inflects or dictates the meaning" (18). As Kittler put forward, style is a function of media. He couples laconism to the media-historical *a priori* of the telegraph, his scope being limited to a certain notion of *technical* media, although, in the case of Nietzsche, head and eye are considered "physiological" conditions of writing. However, the direct correlation of style and medium eliminates human interference: "Buffon's man, in any case, is dead."⁹ Admittedly, *Man in the Holocene* was not carved in stone but printed in a book (a magazine). However, the text evokes a way of writing that testifies to the poetic agency of non-human agents. Against this backdrop, the narrative is not only a piece of writing *about* geological processes;¹⁰ the writing also takes a form that emerged in the process of rock carving, against the resistance of the material. From this perspective, rock takes part in the writing process.

At the beginning of the text, an intense description of the formative forces of erosion is quoted from a book dealing with the history of Ticino:

As sections of the earth's crust emerged above sea level, the natural forces of weathering and erosion at once began their work of shaping and displacing. Frost and wind produced ridges and peaks on the raised masses of rock, while water and glaciers ate into the furrows and carved out the first valleys. This was no continuous process: it was spread over various periods, widely separated in time (40/18).¹¹

⁸ "Anders als der Lakonismus rekurriert der L[apidarstil] entsprechend seiner Etymologie noch vor seinem figurativen Bedeutungspotential auf materiale Aspekte" (Hettinger, *Lapidarstil* 5: 28).

⁹ "Buffons Mensch jedenfalls ist tot" (Kittler, *Telegrammstil* 367). In publications translated to English, Kittler also hints at this argument (*Discourse* 190-91, *Gramophone* 200).

¹⁰ As Jussi Parikka put forward, "the archives of geology give, not a model, but the material for what would later be media and technology" (138).

¹¹ The effect is even stronger in the German original: "Kaum aber waren diese Erdkrustenteile aus dem Meeresspiegel emporgetaucht, da setzten auch schon die natürlichen Kräfte der Verwitterung und der Erosion ein und begannen ihre Modellier- und Abtragungsarbeit. Während Fröste und Winde Bergkämme und Gipfel aus den emporgehobenen Felsmassen herausarbeiteten, verbissen sich Wasser und Gletscher in die Furchen und sägten erste Täler ein. Diese Arbeiten erfolgten aber nicht in einem Zuge, sondern in verschiedenen, zeitlich weit auseinander liegenden Perioden" (Frisch, *Holozän* 18-19).

Anthropomorphism, theriomorphism, and technomorphism mark the choice of verbs in this passage and place erosion into the larger context of a formative labor that is not unique to a particular species or even a particular realm of nature.

In an interview, Frisch likened his writings to the delicate sculptures of Alberto Giacometti: “The extreme slenderness of the figure establishes the surrounding space ... The slenderer the figure, the more space is inserted between itself and other figures—and the more life” (qtd. in Rossbacher 255). Like the sculptures of Giacometti, literature aims for life; but it can only grasp it *ex negativo* by not making too much space for human figures. Life is what takes place in the environment; it is not limited to character, biography or social relations. This is why in Frisch’s narrative, the human so-called protagonist is thinned out. Geiser is named after a geological phenomenon (*geyser*). The name serves as a vehicle that relocates or reframes the character and casts him into the Icelandic landscape that is described as both hyperactive and devoid of humans in one of two longer continuous passages of the text:

Another volcano, a new one, has risen from the sea, an island of ash and basalt; its first inhabitants, when the ash cools, are birds that feed on fish; their excrement will form the beginning of an oasis in which human beings can live, until the next stream of lava smothers it all. Probably the fish will outlive us, and the birds. (Frisch, *Holocene* 58)

The description is followed by a snippet from an encyclopedia dealing with the lemma “Man.” Here, minute letters spell out the singularity of the human. In contrast to the rhetorical energy flowing from the *hypotyposis* of geological and biological activity on the preceding pages, this assertion of human singularity seems ironic and tends to be reversed into its opposite.

To sum up, one erosive effect of the eco-poetics sustaining *Man in the Holocene* is the reframing of carving, not as a destructive but as a creative process that allows for a circumscription of life by taking the figure of the human out of the picture. Another erosive effect is the leveling of a hierarchic order of agents; mineral, fungal, vegetal, animal, and human makers are assembled on the same plane by establishing an equivalence and structural analogy of formative forces. However, this comes at a price: first, the erasure of differences between particular poetic practices that converge into one anonymous formative force and, second, indifference towards the ontological, poetological, and actual extinction of mankind (97).

Zoopoetic Approach: Particular Practices

The severe weather that re-shapes the valley and is extrapolated to a climatic disaster of global extent is announced by animal messengers. The following analysis of animals as reflexive figures of poetological and epistemological import is informed by two theoretical efforts: first, Aaron Moe's introduction of zoopoetics as a theory that recognizes nonhuman animals as makers that are involved in the production of literature through their specific "vocalizations" (2) and the "material gestures" that have a "bodily" dimension (4); and second, Kári Driscoll's notion of zoopoetics as the reciprocal constitution of animals and language.¹² This includes "zoopoiesis," "the creation of the animal as much as the creation by means of the animal" (223).

The first animals encountered in the narrative are a cloud of gnats.¹³ These parasitic insects appear less as symbolic animals emblematic of mythical catastrophes¹⁴ and more as diegetic animals,¹⁵ a living and blood-sucking multitude.

It started on the Thursday of the previous week, when it was still possible to sit out in the open; the weather was sultry, as always before a thunderstorm the gnats biting through one's socks, no summer lightning—it just felt uncomfortable (Frisch, *Holocene* 38).

The layers or sediments of meaning that have accumulated over the course of cultural history around the swarming "pest" are waved away with only one laconic comment: "it just felt uncomfortable." Attention is directed away from implications and connotation and drawn towards the body's allergic reaction

¹² This constellation could easily be extended to include the environment as a third constituent, interacting both with animals and language.

¹³ Eva Horn sees swarms as the promise as well as the threat of a collective without a center (8). She highlights their involvement in transmissions (*Übertragungen*), especially from non-human to human animals (10) and points out their adaptability to environmental conditions (11) as well as their capacity to figure vital complexity: "The swarm is a figure of the complexity and uncontrollability of the living" ("Der Schwarm figuriert die Komplexität und Unkontrollierbarkeit des Lebendigen"; 20).

¹⁴ Like the third plague inflicted on Egypt: "and gnats came on humans and animals alike; all the dust of the earth turned into gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt" (*Bible* Exod. 8,17).

¹⁵ In his pivotal account of animals in literature, Roland Borgards distinguishes between semiotic animals (appearing as carriers of meaning) and diegetic animals (living organisms populating the narrated world). This distinction should be taken as a heuristic means providing orientation in the vast realm of poetic fauna, not as a definitive categorization (89-93).

to the bites instead, to the itch that marks the “contact zone” (Haraway 4); or better yet: the zone of an *overlapping* of man and animal where the gnats’ proboscis penetrates first the second skin (the socks) and then the first (the epidermis) injecting a coagulant and extracting blood from Geiser’s veins. Proteins and iron dissolved in Geiser’s blood will assist in the generation of eggs. The gnats’ lives are entangled with their host’s life through assisted procreation. What is more, the assistance is mutual. Bite by bite, bit by bit, the image of Geiser’s body disintegrates; already in the very beginning he is disappearing and it is the animals that assist him in his disappearance by perforating and penetrating the boundary between man and animal.

As Max Frisch put forward in his lectures on poetics, one of the main purposes of literature is to cause irritation; irritation owed to the simple fact that there is still something else, an alternative to the status quo (*Schwarzes Quadrat* 71); some thing or other. Against this backdrop, the gnats can be read as poetological figures, material tropes that speak to the makings and workings of the text. For Frisch, literature must bite like a gnat. Our irritation in the process of reading reminds us that there is something else, that the text is not only about an individual life that is already fading (Geiser’s), about the ailments of an aging author (Frisch), or about mankind, but also about what else is out there, besides humans, be it as small as an insect.

Whereas the gnat’s presence is fleshed out, birds are introduced *in absentia*.¹⁶ There is “[n]ot a bird on the grounds” (Frisch, *Holocene* 38). Negation turns the birds into signifiers, depriving them of their diegetic lives, and yet links them to the insects on the syntagmatic axis, and the swarms band together. On the page, the birds immediately follow the gnats; and, in fact, the birds carry on gnats’ work by eroding the human-animal divide:

One summer the woodpeckers got a sudden idea, as it were: they stopped pecking the bark of the old chestnut tree and started on the windowpanes; more and more of them came, all seemingly obsessed by glass. Not even strips of glittering foil frightened them off for long. It became a real nuisance. If one went to the window to shoo them away, they at once moved to another and one could not be at every window, clapping one’s hands. (57)

¹⁶ The absence of birds brings to mind an ecocritical classic: Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*: “There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh” (Carson 2).

The disturbing descent of beaked beasts pecking on the panes constitutes another case of “bio-erosion.” Like chestnut blight the woodpeckers first destroy the bark of the trees, acting as vivid memento of the extinction event.¹⁷ Assuming the uncanny air of the birds in Hitchcock’s 1963 movie, the whole flock descends on the windows, pecking away at the walls Geiser had chosen as his third skin, in order to cut himself off from the valley and the world. The breaking down of the architectural structure is prefigured in the woodpeckers’ physique. Through evolutionary history practice in pecking formed their beak into “a specialized chisel effective in cutting into a tree” (Yoon and Park 3). The wielding of this corporeal tool against the house, constitutes a “material gesture” (Moe 4) that has poetological implications.¹⁸ Frisch, speaking both as author and architect, addresses this materiality in his metaphorical approach to poetic language:

Language is like a chisel that knocks away everything that is not secret; and to tell something always means to delete.... One tells what is not life itself. One tells it for life’s sake. Language works like the sculptor when he wields the chisel, driving forth the emptiness, the expressible, against the secret, the living. (Frisch, *Schwarzes Quadrat* 23)¹⁹

The beaks of the woodpeckers can be read as so many chisels that break down the barriers between nature and culture; that break down the “bark” of the human subject and open the narrative towards the environment. The walls of the ‘house of language’ crumble like the pagoda of crispbread that Geiser tries to erect in the beginning of the narrative (38).

At one point, Geiser encounters an amphibian: “A spotted salamander in the bathroom—” (Frisch, *Schwarzes Quadrat* 59). It is trapped in the tub and the old man starts to experiment on it: “When Geiser prods it gently with the toe of his shoe, it just kicks out with all four legs. Quite automatically.

¹⁷ The representation of the woodpeckers avoids the genre of *species elegy* described by Ursula Heise who uses the ivory-billed woodpecker as an example to point out the re-interpretation of biological facts as an expression of cultural trauma (the clearing of the US-American south) (Heise 56-60).

¹⁸ Maybe that is why the text copes with the avian intervention by reluctantly granting them the capacity to be inventive. This attribution of a rhetorical category (*inventio* being one of the five *officia oratoris*) vaguely gestures at an animal *poiesis*.

¹⁹ “[D]ie Sprache ist wie ein Meißel, der alles weghaut, was nicht Geheimnis ist; und alles Sagen bedeutet ein Entfernen.... Man sagt, was nicht das Leben ist. Man sagt es um des Lebens willen. Wie der Bildhauer, wenn er den Meißel führt, arbeitet die Sprache, indem sie die Leere, das Sagbare, vortreibt gegen das Geheimnis, gegen das Lebendige” (Frisch, *Schwarzes Quadrat* 23).

Then it goes quiet again, its skin armored, black with yellow spots, and slimy” (59). This account of the reaction evokes the persistent Cartesian doctrine of the animal machine that reinforces a binary opposition between humans and animals (Kling; Kalof and Fitzgerald 59). But although Geiser refrains from touching the Salamander, he does not stop at this conception. He dares to take a closer look:

When one examines a spotted salamander through a magnifying glass, it looks like a monster: a dinosaur.... It crawls doggedly in a direction in which it will never make any progress. Suddenly it lies still again, its head raised. One can see its pulse beating. An awful dullness in all limbs. (Frisch, *Holocene* 64)

The amphibian is related to the dinosaurs that frequently show up throughout the text. Not only a metaphorical connection is established but also a metonymical connection is suggested; and it is founded in evolutionary theory. Geiser draws up a list of dinosaur species (86) and several drawings and pieces of information about them are pasted in the text. This fascination culminates in a minimal zoography of the most terrible of the terrible saurians:

It was, however, with the development of the amazing *Tyrannosaurus rex* that the dinosaurs reached their apex; no more terrible and powerful carnivore has ever arisen to terrorize the earth.... Although these true tyrants among the dinosaurs had nothing to fear anywhere on earth, their reign was of short duration. They first emerged in the Late Cretaceous and vanished—along with all the other dinosaurs—at the end of this period, when they were suddenly and inexplicably wiped out. (66)

The appearance of dinosaurs in the text centers on the issue of their disappearance. The text digresses from the biographical time-scale and focuses on events that constitute breaks in deep evolutionary time. When Geiser turns to examining himself, he discovers a physiognomic resemblance that implies another analogy: “When Geiser looks in the mirror again to see his face, he knows that the name of his daughter in Basel is Corinne ... even if Geiser does look like a newt (89).²⁰ Following the established chain of signifiers, Geiser also looks like a dinosaur. The vivid description of the tyranny of the reptile kings is no longer only an anthropomorphic account

²⁰ Rossbacher points out that even the direct negation (“Geiser is not a newt” 90) cannot help but posit first what it later denies, thus always nurturing the suspicion that Geiser could, in fact, be a newt (256-57); he draws on Schmitz who highlights the fascination and the perceived threat involved in Frisch’s negation (24, fn.).

of the animal realm but starts to operate both ways: it is also a theriomorphic representation of the despotic behavior of “man” (towards “nature”). The enforced question of whether or not “man” has become the *Tyrannosaurus rex* of the present age is seconded by the emphasis of the tyrant’s mortality. Does he not deserve to be overthrown?

Geiser’s look in the mirror occurs at a time when he has become frail and endangered; he scans his face for symptoms of apoplexy. The magnifying glass becomes the device and the emblem of another look that does not focus on individual lifeforms. The salamander’s colorful spots resemble the fragments and snippets collaged in *Man in the Holocene*. They put things in relation. Studying animals, examining mirror images, and readings texts are different ways to relate things (to one another): “And, if necessary, one can always use the magnifying glass for reading” (Frisch, *Holocene* 66). The salamander’s body is covered in warning signs for potential predators. This example of animal rhetoric is mimicked by Frisch who aims at warning with the help of his writings:

I want to posit myself as the amateur who—through sensitivity, maybe even through a seismographic one that registers earthquakes when the others have not noticed anything yet,...—represents, warns; Cassandra” (Frisch, Dindo, and Pilliod).

To sum up, one prosopopoetic effect²¹ of the zoopoetics sustaining *Man in the Holocene* is the catachresis²² of infinitely complex environmental processes. Animals embody particular poetic practices and thus break down the anony-

²¹ In the rhetorical tradition, prosopopoiia is a figure that gives a face or a voice to things, abstract notions, the dead or the absent. Bettina Menke established it as the master-trope for readability. Whereas it masks (Gr. *prosopon* = mask) the lack of a face as a guaranty for readability, it simultaneously states that there has been no face before (137). From this lack, fictions emerge (144). Menke also teases out the tension between the catachrestic and the anthropomorphic dimension of *prosopopoiia*. Against the “false realism” of the anthropomorphic tendency, the figure situates language in-between the human and the non-human (173). This is aptly exemplified with recourse to the romantic fascination for sounding stones (161) and petrified texts (198).

²² According to Max Black, *catachresis* is “the use of a word in some new sense in order to remedy a gap in the vocabulary;” “the putting of new senses into old words” (33). Departing from this view, *catachresis* is a productive operation in the sense that it embeds “system of things” (44) in discourse that could hardly be addressed otherwise as there is no way to express them “literally.” Insofar as metaphors produce an irreducible cognitive surplus (46), *catachresis* can be understood as an aspect of metaphor. In Menke’s words, *catachresis* puts a name to something that did not have a name before (143). It exposes the figurativity and arbitrariness of the insertion of the signifier and therefore generates fictions (144).

mous formative force. Another effect is the embedding and inscription of humans in the environment via anthropomorphism. However, this translation runs the risk of anthropocentrism, of making “man” the measure of all things, focusing on the actual threat of ecological extinction and avoiding the ontological and poetological extinction of “man.”

The Dialectic of Erosive and Prosopopoetic Effects

In this last part, I want to sketch the relationship of eco-poetics and zoopoetics as a dialectical one. In my view, both critical approaches inform each other; each occupying a blind spot of the other. Rather than conflicting, they are complementary and each can be regarded as a critique of the other.

The eco-poetic approach has erosive effects that work against an assumed singularity of “man”²³ as it puts different poetic agents and different forms of *poiesis* on the same level. As it allows for the recognition of a universal formative force (like erosion) that is at work both in texts and in their surroundings, human productions are not exceptional. The notion of poetics is opened and extended to encompass human, animal, vegetal, fungal, mineral, and other makings. The equivalence of material gestures works as an antidote to poetological and ontological anthropocentrism. Within a frame of reference that is stretched to include deep-time evolutionary and geological poetic processes, the lifetime of human individuals, as well as the period of human existence on earth, lose weight as privileged measures. The resulting skepticism with regard to human singularity makes for an important lesson in the so-called “Anthropocene” (Crutzen and Stoermer), when a global formative force is assigned to *Homo sapiens*. However, the erosion of differences can be regarded as problematic because, in the abstract picture produced by the eco-poetic approach, the particular practices that change the planet and

This view offers the possibility to conceive of Frisch’s narrative as the fiction resulting from catachrestic focal points.

²³ In the famous last passage of *The Order of Things*, Foucault frames the epistemic break that causes the erasure of “man” as an effect of marine erosion: “Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area—European culture since the sixteenth century—one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it. In fact, among all the mutations that have affected the knowledge of things ... only one, that which began a century and a half ago and is now perhaps drawing to a close, has made it possible for the figure of man to appear. And that appearance was ... the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge.... If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared ... then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (421-22).

the particular vulnerabilities to these changes of certain species, populations, or individuals (or classes of human society!) tend to be overlooked.

The zoopoetic approach has a prosopopoetic effect giving a “face”—or rather a “mask”—to abstract processes, countering the lack in depth of focus. That “mask” is animal (say a salamander, a cloud of gnats, or a flock of woodpeckers). Through attentiveness to the diverse animal bodies that shape the environment, the zoopoetics approach can account for the particularities within the spectrum of formative activities. Focusing on the differences between concrete agents, this approach allows for representation and critical reflection. In doing so, it also shows that ecology is not only an anonymous flow of matter and energy. However, this approach tends to privilege specific makers that have a familiar face, and runs the risk of losing sight of the environment makers are embedded in. Humans can only speak, think and approach literature as humans. The awareness of this ineluctable epistemological anthropomorphism inherent in the concept of zoopoetics (and, for that matter, other concepts) re-inscribes human lifeforms and their best interest: that the extinction of *Homo sapiens* remains merely figurative. From an eco-poetic perspective, the disappearance of humans does not significantly alter the picture.

According to *Man in the Holocene*, texts and environments are co-productions of manifold agents; these agents are certainly not only human, and they are not only animal. The narrative explores the possibilities of a non-human making by presenting a fringed section from the entangled natural and cultural history of a valley, partly refracted through the eyes of a representative of a species on the brink of extinction.

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