

The Audition of History and the Vocation of Man: Reflections on Extinction and Human Destiny

A swishing wind does not outlast the morning; pelting rain does not outlast the day. What makes these things but heaven and earth? If heaven and earth cannot maintain them for long, how can man?

Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

Humans lived here once; it became sacred only when they went away.

Adrienne Rich, "Shooting Script"

In *After Man: A Zoology of the Future*, Dougal Dixon presents a taxonomy, written as if by a scientific emissary to the future, of the fauna of a "post-homic," abandoned Earth. The human species, we discover, is gone, and so, too, are nearly all those creatures weakened by excessive contact with humankind in the present day. The future Earth's dominant animals have evolved out of what are now only peripheral creatures: rats, bats, and rabbits. Rats, for example, have become fierce predators the size of large dogs; bats have taken many new forms, including the book's most fearsome monster, the Night Stalker, a five-foot-tall, blind, extremely vicious carnivore that runs on its hind feet; and rabbits have become Rabbucks, deerlike creatures almost seven feet tall at the shoulder. This future world's zoology should not surprise us, Dixon remarks. After all, mammals, today's dominant animals, waited in the wings for nearly one hundred million years before rising to prominence.

Dixon's vision is no mere whimsy; it is meticulously thoughtout and based on scientific projections from current ecological, geological, and genetic knowledge. Yet the real future will no doubt prove far stranger, as Dixon readily admits, for he has not attempted to create anything radically new, nor could he. In his crystal ball his fancy has merely seen the tremendous variety of present life forms, inventions, and adaptations radically rearranged; the real future, of course, will have no such limitation. (Truth, as Mark Twain, once quipped, is always stranger than fiction, for fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities, while truth is not.)

Interestingly, Dixon's bestiary for an Earth fifty million years from now does not really explain the disappearance of the world's present dominant species. Humankind's extinction is taken for granted by Dixon and attributed to our

overdevelopment, the exhaustion of natural resources, and a reluctance to stay within the bounds of natural evolution—for example, our extended, unnatural life expectancy. But Dixon does not even bother to provide an obituary, let alone a eulogy, for his own kind. There is nothing really uncanny about his version of an abandoned Earth.

Reading *After Man*, however, I could not help thinking about the peculiar creatures we are: beings capable of imagining, as an intellectual exercise, a thought experiment, a world that has passed us by; able to dream of our own extinction and then to communicate this dream with supreme objectivity in a beautifully illustrated \$14.95 coffee-table volume! Perhaps, I thought, *After Man* represents the appearance of a new eschatological genre for the human imagination. Have we not already imagined, or endeavored to imagine, the world before we emerged? It seems only natural, then, that the human mind has begun to colonize—in the imagination—a post-homic Earth.

But Dixon's insouciance about our fate, we must remind ourselves, actually represents a newly acquired, contemporary capacity of the species mind. To trace the development of that ability, to show how we have learned to live with extinction, is one of the goals of the present reflections. To understand its meaning, to offer an evolutionary psychology, if you will, of the confrontation of man, "that quintessence of dust," with his own possible demise, is another.

I

Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the race.
How should we dream of this place without us?
The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,
A stone look on the stone's face?

Richard Wilbur, "Advice to a Prophet"

Facing the possibility of death, the individual goes through five distinct stages—as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has taught us—from initial denial of the possibility of such a fate, to eventual acceptance of the inevitable. What is true for the person would seem to be true for the species as well. Once we could not admit that we would ever die; but now we have begun to accept the unavoidable; we contemplate with real seriousness an Earth abandoned through eradication of the human.

Before the discovery of evolution, humankind's right to "multiply and subdue the Earth" was largely unquestioned and uncontested—at least in the modern period. Mythological and religious conceptions of eschatology, it is true, had once reminded us there might be an end to time (the Norse myth of Ragnarok, for example, in which the death of the gods brings about the end of all life on Midgard as well—though it is eventually reborn into a golden age). But after the Renaissance our preeminence over nature hardened into a conservative and self-congratulatory anthropocentrism that occluded any real glimpse of the end.

As a recent, copiously documented study, Keith Thomas's *Man and the Natural World: History of the Modern Sensibility*, demonstrates, "Man's ascendancy over the animal and vegetable world . . . has been a basic precondition of human history, firmly grounded, theologically and sociologically." In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, such an attitude had virtually become a dogma, as Thomas, citing contemporary authorities:

Man was the end of all God's works, declared Jeremiah Burroughes in 1657; 'He made others for man, and man for himself.' 'All things,' agreed Richard Bentley in 1692, were created 'principally for the benefit and pleasure of man.' 'Man, if we look to final causes, may be regarded as the centre of the world,' mused Francis Bacon, 'in so much that if man were taken away from the world, the rest would seem to be all astray, without aim or purpose.' Some divines thought that after the Day of Judgment the world would be annihilated; it had been made only to accommodate humanity and would have no further use" (18).

The possibility that we might become extinct was virtually unthinkable through the eighteenth century. In fact, in the pre-Darwinian scheme of things—Lovejoy's "great chain of being"—no individual being, let alone human beings, could disappear from the *scala naturae*. Since each was believed to be a manifestation, an overflow, an aspect of God's perfection governed by the "principle of plenitude," the idea of extinction was tantamount to blasphemy: how could a perfect deity create a transient, failed form of life? Under this paradigm, it simply made no sense to speak of extinction.

The unthinkableness of extinction was governed by psychological factors as well as theological ones. Only a century and a half ago, as Loren Eiseley explains in

"How Death Became Natural" in *The Firmament of Time*, "The hint of extinction in the geological past was like a cold wind out of a dark cellar. It chilled men's souls." It was humiliating. "It brought with it doubts of the rational world men had envisaged on the basis of their own mind. It brought suspicions as to the nature of the cozy best-of-all-possible worlds which had been created especially for men" (37).

After a period of intellectual struggle, the realization that species did in fact become extinct, as the fossil record confirmed, finally gained credence. Even after this realization, some thinkers, anxious to maintain our preeminence, resorted to a last form of rationalization, arguing that time's arrow still pointed toward humankind as its logical culmination, even if the field was littered with the bodies of the unsuccessful dead. However, against the pulverizing assault of the all-consuming modern quest for objectivity—even about our own insignificance—this form of cognitive dissonance could not and did not long endure, though contemporary creationists have again sought to revive it.

Displaced, dethroned, diminished, it is not surprising that the human mind, despite our faith in science, now finds little comfort in the new worldview that French Nobel laureate Jacques Monod offers in his *Chance and Necessity* as both the logical conclusion to be drawn from the study of evolution and as the prerequisite to all future scientific progress (which he takes to be equal to human progress).

Man must at last wake out of his millenary dream;¹ and in doing so, wake to his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. Now does he at last realize that, like a gypsy, he lives on the boundary of an alien world. A world that is deaf to his music, just as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his suffering or his crimes.

The ancient covenant is in pieces; man knows at last that he is alone in the universe's unfeeling immensity, out of which he emerged only by chance.
(172-73, 180)

¹ The "millenary dream," Monod explains, is essentially the hope of living in a world of meaning. It is, according to Monod's reductionistic thinking, the result of an innate tendency toward animism: our "projection into inanimate nature of man's awareness of the intensely teleonomic functioning of his own central nervous system. It is, in other words, the hypothesis that natural phenomena can and must be explained in the same manner, by the same 'laws,' as subjective human activity, conscious and purposive" (170).

A distinctly contemporary voice, Monod is asking us to be realistic about our meaninglessness—a simple request! Jean-Paul Sartre, Monod's contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre concludes his *Being and Nothingness* with the realization that "man is a useless passion" (784), and Monod agrees, lending scientific credibility to the philosopher's conjecture. And if *Homo sapiens* happened on the scene by chance, we may very well pass away with no great consternation and without any just cause—except evolution's necessity. After all, no "ancient covenant" can protect us.

Actually, evolution, and the diminution of man from the "centre, of the world" to a "gypsy" living on "the boundary of an alien world" which followed in its wake, were a natural outgrowth of an older and more universal human intellectual quest, born in the Copernican Revolution, which Hannah Arendt described as the search for the Archimedean point:

Without as yet actually occupying the point where Archimedes had wished to stand, we have found a way to act on the earth as though we disposed of terrestrial nature from outside, from the point of Einstein's "observer freely poised in space." If we look down from this point at what is going on on earth and upon the various activities of men, that is, if we apply the Archimedean point to ourselves, then these activities will indeed appear to ourselves as no more than "overt behavior," which we can study with the same methods we use to study the behavior of rats.

Only from such a perspective, outside the "booming, buzzing confusion" of earthly life, beyond the presently human-dominated planet, do our evolutionary achievements become a matter of relativity. The Psalmist might ask of God, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;/What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" and still feel real wonder at the phenomenon of mankind. The chorus in *Antigone* could exclaim in awe: "Many are the marvelous things; but none that can be/More of a marvel than man!" But having himself attained an Archimedean, semi-divine point of view since the Copernican revolution and the rise of modern science, God becomes not so mindful of us, not so full of wonder or admiration.

Instead, as Arendt has shown, man, indeed everything human, comes to seem merely "natural":

Seen from a sufficient distance the cars in which we travel and which we know we built ourselves . . . look as though they were, as Heisenberg once put it, 'as inescapable a part of ourselves as the snail's shell is to its occupant.'" Consequently, Arendt insists, "the overview effect" decreases human stature: "All our pride in what we can do . . . disappears into some kind of mutation of the human race; the whole of technology, seen from this point, in fact no longer appears as the result of a conscious human effort to extend man's material power, but rather as a large-scale biological process. ("Man's Conquest" 540)

Subsumed by this process, the mind not only comes to accept man's extinction but even to envision value-free accounts of a post-homic Earth. *After Man* is a message from the Archimedean Point.

The evolutionary *Weltanschauung* thus awoke mankind from what Michel Foucault calls the "anthropological sleep" of Western culture, opening our eyes to our own contingency. Humankind could no longer take its existence for granted; our destiny could no longer be assumed to be equal to the world's. By 1873, Nietzsche (by his own admission a "posthumous man" but also a "post-homic" one), writing "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," felt certain enough about the nature and destiny of the human to conclude, with definitive Archimedean realism, that we have greatly exaggerated our own importance:

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems there was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of "world history"—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.

One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it. (42; my emphasis)

By the 20th Century it had become even more routine to think the previously unthinkable. In George Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, for example, we find a statement like the following from its Lamarckian author: "The power that produced Man when the monkey was not up to the mark, can produce a higher creature than Man if Man is not up to the mark" (xvii). The stoic acceptance of evolutionary logic in Shaw's "Metabiological Pentateuch" identifies him as distinctly contemporary, though born in the middle of the Victorian era.

Yet even Nietzsche's and Shaw's refusal to accept the "descent of man" as evolution's telos seems positive, even optimistic, compared with the meditations of younger contemporaries like the poets Sara Teasdale and Robinson Jeffers, who in their "inhumanist" verse pictured the end of humankind and well-nigh celebrated the resumption of the Earth's natural evolutionary order without the human.

Teasdale's "There will Come Soft Rains," for example, describes with great beauty a "silent spring"—silent because men and not the birds have disappeared—after an ultimate war. (I quote the 1920 poem in its entirety.)

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,
And wild plum trees in tremulous white;

Robins will wear their feathery fire,
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree,
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn
Would scarcely know that we were gone.

Teasdale's vision is remarkable in its peacefulness: a kind of wishful thinking, the poem seems not at all bothered by those rhetorical (and solipsistic) questions Richard Wilbur ironically proposes in the lines quoted as epigraph to this section. To Teasdale, it seems only natural to "dream of this place without us," to allow Earth in its noumenal splendor to endure "untroubled about us."

And the iconoclast and radical misanthrope Jeffers—who castigated his species from his stone tower at Big Sur, who thought of us as "the contagion of consciousness that infects this corner of space" and predicted that "a day will come when the Earth will scratch herself and smile and rub off humanity"—imagined (in poems like "The Truce and the Peace" [1918]) the Earth without us attaining a tranquility that is hers by right, though our presence has temporarily blighted and obscured it.

How can she die, she is the blood unborn,
The energy in earth's arteries beating red,
The world will flame with her in some great morn,

The whole great world flame with her, and we be dead.

Here in the west it grows by grim degrees,
In the east flashed and will flame terror and light.
Peace now poor earth, peace to that holier peace.
Deep in the soul held secret from all sight
That crystal, the pure home, the holier peace,
Fires flaw not, scars the crudest cannot crease.

Shaw's, Teasdale's, and Jeffers's imaginings of a post-homic Earth were all affected, directly or indirectly, by the same post World War I loss of faith in a human future that produced the Lost Generation and Dadaism, but the subsequent history of this century, terrorized by yet another world war and the contemporary twin threats of nuclear holocaust and ecological catastrophe, has guaranteed successors to this essentially inhumanist tradition and to fuller Space Age imagining of, even theorizing about, the eradication of humankind.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has suggested that writers are "specialized cells in the social organism," "evolutionary cells" that function as alarm systems, as a kind of

distant early warning system alerting us to perils which lie ahead (238). In the meditations of later twentieth-century thinkers and writers, it would seem, the species has now begun fully to imagine—in a time when the question of extinction has become exponentially more real to us—its own end, as if its sustaining faith lay in the resolution (espoused by Thomas Hardy) that "if a way to the better there be, it lies in taking a full look at the worst." In these imaginations of disaster, mankind contemplates—with great seriousness and, strangely, real objectivity—an abandoned Earth, abandoned because of its own demise, and imagines it so fully, in fact, that the old chestnut once pondered by philosophical idealism—"If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, will it make a noise?"—has become instead the humiliating question: "If we fall, will the Earth hear us?" The following section will present a sampling of these diverse prophecies.

II

Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. . . .

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age
of Mechanical Reproduction"

In a modern-day creation myth, "A Woman as Great as the World," anthropologist Jacquetta Hawkes offers a reverse-angle version of Watson's "Letter from God" that attempts to account fully for the evolution of the Earth and humanity's place within it—but this time from from the Earth's point of view. For the woman as great as the world in Hawkes's modern myth is the world; she is the Earth—what the ancient Greeks once called Gaea.

Hawkes tells how in the beginning this woman was "of placid disposition, and, knowing everything, had no cares." Complete in herself, unconscious of her meaning, she is, like Watson's god, unaware of her own finest qualities, until disturbed by the masculine Wind (a kind of Hegelian Spirit, consciousness) that begins to visit her, eventually inspiring her own evolution. The presence of the Wind causes the mind of the woman to "be filled . . . with images of herself which hung before her and seemed by their presence to demand an explanation."

Sometimes, the fable explains, the wind demands that the woman yield to his sexual desire for her. Impregnated by him, she brings forth a plethora of creatures which, though they reveal "in every part the endless inventiveness, the immeasurably powerful imagination of the generating Wind," nevertheless also fulfill the woman, "increasing her beauty like a fine garment." But then one day the Wind, after having been away for a long time, returns and, without her invitation, assaults the woman. Pregnant again with new life from this rape, the woman feels stirring within her a new kind of awareness; she finds herself closer than ever before to comprehending her own secret life, her own significance. Her progeny, however, which she had expected to be the most splendid creatures yet born from her womb, disappoint her: for the product of the Wind's rape of Earth is our species.

And yet the "ugly little mommets who walk clumsily on two legs" surprise the woman at first. Humans, she finds, are the Wind in miniature; as they move about her surface she feels through them a "new disturbing thing, a persistent self-consciousness as though the Wind were always with her, as though he were present among the tissues of her body." (We are reminded of the newfound egotistical awareness of god in Watson's "Letter.") Thinking with a new clarity, Earth even dreams of rivaling the Wind in cleverness and imagination. She begins to challenge the Wind's authority, combating him with logic.

The woman becomes jealous, however, when she discovers that the Wind speaks privately with the new creatures behind her back and treats them as special children. The mommets begin to trouble her, to irritate her physical being: "They tormented her skin and flesh in a hundred ways by their restless activity; they were spoiling her physical beauty even while they were destroying her age-long peace of mind." Deciding with feminist conviction that "her body was her own and hers the completeness of being," she expunges the mommets from her and returns to a state of quiescence; "knowing everything and caring not at all," she rests content, satisfied even if the Wind should never return, even if she should never again be self-conscious.

Hawkes's fable is of course a wonderful capsule history of human/Earth coevolution; but it is also a prediction. Humankind brings to the woman, to Earth, a masculine, yang-like completeness in which she somehow incorporates the earlier processes of her own becoming and the fruits of the awareness the Wind and the mommets have given her into a higher unconsciousness and self-sufficient being. Her visitants, this fable's harsh truth is telling us, are instrumental to her self-perfection.

Yet they are at the same time a pest, an infestation, and once her metamorphosis is complete, she simply does not need them.

Hawkes's vision is not, of course, unique. Such a conception of our place on Earth was, in fact, something of a romantic commonplace, as can be seen in the German poet Novalis's vatic pronouncement, "Man is the messiah of nature." And it owes much as well to Teilhard de Chardin's idea of the "hominization" of Earth. But while acknowledging that humankind may be for a time the planet's means of seeing itself, of raising its consciousness, Hawkes does not agree that the Woman as Great as the World will always need her eyes. Nor does Hawkes see the mommets escaping their earthly doom through the escape hatch of outer space. To accept Hawkes's message requires us to view the destruction of the species as merely a phase in an evolution vaster than we can comprehend, in which we may well be denied actual participation. And her voice is only one in a swelling contemporary chorus.

"It's only us that wants us to survive," the late Gregory Bateson remarked in a 1978 interview. "No doubt the rest of the world would give a sigh of relief to see us go. A few tapeworms might say, 'Oh, my God, what will we do now?' But the rest of the world would settle into a new equilibrium" ("Breaking Out" 47). According to Bateson's understanding of the "ecology of mind," the Earth, and Earth's natural "mind" (which Bateson calls "Creatura"), may require such a peace as a stage in a natural, an ecological process. Like Freud in his conception of the "death instinct" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Bateson, perhaps the first full-fledged theoretician of human extinction, sees life, and the consciousness that periodically emerges from it, forever pulled back toward the "quiescence of the inorganic world" as part of the housekeeping of the Woman as Great as the World housekeeping, the ecologically governed "self-healing" drift toward stability (or "tautology," as Bateson calls it [Mind and Nature 208]), in which "ugly little mommets" will be erased and the Earth can again repose in all the "completeness of being," with true peace of mind.

And certainly if humankind dies, Bateson insists, we cannot say that we have not asked for it, that we have not brought it on ourselves. The attitudes and assumptions that will bring about our doom, as *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* shows, have been with us at least since the beginning of Western history:

If you put God outside and and set him vis-a-vis his creation and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you arrogate all

mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will seem to be yours to exploit. Your survival unit will be you and your conspecifics against the environment of other social units, other races and the brutes and vegetables.

If this is your estimate of your relation to nature and you have an advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell. You will die either of the toxic by-products of your own own hate, or, simply, of overpopulation and overgrazing. The raw materials of the world are finite. (462)

In Bateson's voice we hear the kind of acceptance Kubler-Ross counsels us to seek as we come to see death as "the final stage of growth." And it is interesting to note that in the interview from which I have quoted, which was conducted soon before Bateson's own death from cancer, he expressly draws analogies between personal death (which he compares to erasing an overfilled blackboard) and the ecologically natural wiping out of the human.

In the closing lines of *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault offers a structuralist vision of the erasure of mankind.

If those arrangements [which allowed the figure of "man" to emerge in the modern age] were to disappear as they appeared, if some vent which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. (387)

By erasure—this passage makes clear—the French archaeologist of knowledge does not have in mind physical extinction, though he does not rule out the possibility. His sobering reflections on the fate of the human stem, rather, from a growing conviction, held by other significant modern thinkers (including Heidegger and Levi-Strauss), that the tradition of thought known as humanism is a historical aberration and overvaluation that has served as the wellspring of much of the

madness of the modern age, and that with its now likely exit from the stage of history, humankind as we know it will be erased.

To Foucault, human elevation to the rank of "tyrant of Being" (the phrase is Heidegger's), our self-proclaimed omnipotency over the "discourse" of the world (or, as Bateson would say, our arrogation of all mind to ourselves), ushered in an age not just of the death of God—as Nietzsche announced—but an age that "heralds . . . the end of his murderer": "the explosion of man's face in laughter, and the return of masks; . . . the scattering of the profound stream of time by which he felt himself carried along and whose presence he suspected in the very being of things . . . the identity of the Return of the Same with the absolute dispersion of man" (385; my emphasis).

Though Foucault arrives at the "Return of the Same" via typically French, turgid, almost tortured thought, after profound and yet recondite excursions into the origin of the modern "episteme" in philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and indeed the whole "archeology of the human sciences," in the end we are delivered over to the same world the visions of Dixon, Teasdale, Hawkes, and Bateson offer us: a world without us, devoid any longer of our identity, a world we cannot know, except in zoologies of the future, except through the imagination.

Eschatological prophecies now appear in quite unexpected situations. In Louis Malle's film *My Dinner with Andre* (1981), for example, a playwright (Wallace Shawn) and an experimental theater director (Andre' Gregory) speak of the end of humankind during an evening of fabulous conversation in an elegant New York restaurant. Over after-dinner drinks, Gregory, whose talk has blended total despair with the search for a visionary new order, gives voice to his darkest fear.

It seems to me quite possible that the nineteen-sixties represented the last burst of the human being before he was extinguished. And that this is the beginning of the rest of the future, now, and that from now on there will simply be all these robots running around, feeling nothing, thinking nothing. And there will be nothing left almost to remind them there was a species called a human being, with feelings and thoughts. And that history and memory are right now being erased, and soon no one will remember that life existed on the planet. (Shawn and Gregory 93-94)

Wally, Sancho Panza to Andre's apocalyptic Don Quixote, replies to this not-very-conducive-to-the-digestion monologue with a dumb-founded "Uh-huh." Later he confesses that he doesn't really know what his friend is talking about. Taking refuge in simple pleasures—his reading of Charlton Heston's autobiography, a cup of cold coffee waiting for him in the morning with no cockroach in it—Wally has no desire to learn to live with extinction, while Andre's more encompassing mind, taking a "full look at the worst," in some strange fashion draws inspiration from it.

We can today even hear New Wave rock and roll versions of our doom. In a song called "Walking in Your Footsteps" by the Police, in the early 1980s one of the world's most popular groups, we find a paean to the dinosaur—in particular the Brontosaurus ("built three stories high/They say you would not hurt a fly")—in which the lead singer, Sting, speaking in direct address to another former ruling animal, identifies with its role:

Fifty million years ago
You walked upon the planet so,
Lord of all that you could see
just a little bit like me.
Walking in your footsteps.

Thus he finds its ironic end instructive, containing a "lesson for us": "You were God's favorite creature/But you didn't have a future." Who, the song asks, will be seen as the stupider being, the dinosaur or the human, should the latter destroy itself in a nuclear war? At a Police concert, thousands of fans might be seen enthralled by such a song, mesmerized by the music, perhaps singing the words along with sex-symbol Sting—singing of our extinction! Imagine, if you will, pre-Darwinians brought in a time machine to attend such a performance. What would they make of the prospect, if indeed they could comprehend it at all?

We also find angry and eloquent minority voices contemplating, with a certain righteousness, humankind's eradication—or at least the eradication of Western, white, male civilization. I will cite but two examples.

In "Nuclear Exorcism: Beyond Cursing the Day We Were Born," Alice Walker expresses shame for her species with unequalled vituperation and passion. In the context of a consideration of a terrible "curse-prayer" collected by Zora Neale Hurston in the 1920s, a plea to "the Man God" to bring to the speaker's enemies

absolute havoc—blindness, barrenness, disease, poverty, crop failure, starvation, exposure to the elements, failure of their language, pestilence, death, and more—Walker, certain that the curse's speaker is a woman and inclined to imagine her to be a colored woman, thinks "with astonishment, that the curse-prayer of this colored woman—starved, enslaved, humiliated, and carelessly trampled to death over centuries, is coming to pass. Indeed, like ancient peoples of color the world over, who have tried to tell the white man of the destruction that would inevitably follow from the uranium mining plunder of their sacred lands, this woman—along with millions and billions of obliterated sisters, brothers, and children—seems to have put such enormous energy into her hope for revenge, that her curse seems close to bringing it about. Bringing it about, that is, not for her specific enemies, but for the human species."

And Walker finds herself sorely tempted to shout the curse with her predecessor, to pray it in unison:

When I have considered the enormity of the white man's crimes against humanity. Against women. Against every living person of color. Against the poor. Against my mother and my father. Against me. . . . When I consider that he is, they are, a real and present threat to my life and the life of my daughter, my people, I think—in perfect harmony with my sister of long ago: Let the Earth marinate in poisons. Let the bombs cover the ground like rain. For nothing short of total destruction will ever teach them anything. (341)

She contemplates as well the possibility that "it would be good, perhaps, to put an end to the species in any case, rather than let white men continue to subjugate it and continue their lust to dominate, exploit and despoil not just our planet but the rest of the universe." And she offers, as a proposition that "requires serious thought from every one of us," the dire prospect that "fatally irradiating ourselves may in fact be the only way to save others from what Earth has already become."

Walker, it is true, does go on to qualify her bitterness and to partially annul her curse because of the realization that "accepting our demise as a planet as a simple and just preventative medicine administered to the universe" would bring doom to "the godly and the ungodly alike," and so the "thought of extinction purely for the assumed satisfaction of—from the grave—achieved revenge" cannot long be

entertained. That she contemplates it at all must stand, however, as a distinct landmark in the developing imagination of extinction and the abandoned Earth.

With the rage of the oppressed, the Native American militant Russell Means likewise warns "European man" that "humans do not have the right to degrade Mother Earth," and, reminding us, like Bateson, of the ecological truism that all creatures "must be in harmony with all relations or the relations will eventually eliminate the disharmony," he offers a prophecy of the inevitable destruction of the mommets (whom he identifies as solely the product of a European civilization that, in its arrogance, behaves as though it "were beyond the nature of all related things"): "Mother Earth has been abused, the powers have been abused, and this cannot go on forever. The natural order will win out and the offenders will die back, the way deer die when they offend the harmony by overpopulating a given region. There is no need for a revolutionary theory to bring this about, it's beyond human control" (23).

Apocalyptic imaginings are, of course, also a staple of science fiction. In "Cataclysms and Dooms," J. G. Ballard, the British master of the disaster novel, has even gone so far as to claim that the genre is "itself no more than a minor offshoot of the cataclysmic tale," the history of which stretches back as far as Gilgamesh (130). Though it would be possible to cite hundreds of short stories and novels (including Ballard's own) concerned with the extinction or near extinction of mankind in science fiction, I will limit myself here to two short stories by James Tiptree, Jr. (the pseudonym of Dr. Alice Sheldon).

In Tiptree's "The Last Flight of Doctor Ain," we find a human being seeking to help the Earth rub off humanity. Tiptree imagines a world-renowned scientist who seeks to commit specicide by introducing into the biosphere a genetically redesigned, incredibly lethal leukemia virus, one that is unstoppable because it utilizes the human body's immune system as part of its own life cycle, and although we are never explicitly told what his motives are, we do learn that Doctor Ain has enacted his fiendish plan on the behalf of a woman, a "wounded, dying woman," with whom he is obsessed, even on his own deathbed. After arrest for his act, Ain talks to himself of his love and actions on her behalf, and we finally begin to grasp the nature of his sacrifice.

Blue, blue green until you see the wound. Oh my girl, Oh beautiful, you won't die. I won't let you die. I tell you girl, it's over. . . . Lustrous eyes, look at me,

let me see you alive! Great queen, my sweet body, my girl, have I saved you? . . . Oh terrible to know, and noble, Chaos' child greenrobed in blue and golden light . . . the thrown and spinning ball of life alone in space. . . . Have I saved you? (67)

In his further musing Ain reveals his beloved's name: "Gaea Gloriatrix . . . Gaea girl, queen. . . ." He asks questions of the woman as great as the world, partly as a lover might, partly as a curious scientist, "What did you do about the dinosaurs? . . . Did they annoy you? How did you fix them?" And with the "light clear voice of a lover planning a summer picnic," he suggests before he himself dies that in her next evolutionary experiment she might try using bears as her vehicle for the further development of consciousness (68).

Ain's assistance in his species' eradication is, to his own eyes at least, necessary, as the story makes clear. Left to our own pace, our self-destruction, Ain believes, would have taken Gaea down along with the human race. It is thus essential that he interfere: "Our death would have been your death too," he insists. "No need for that, no need" (68).

In another Tiptree tale, "The Screwfly Solution," the human race is literally exterminated by an alien race interested in acquiring the Earth as a new piece of real estate. Using a complex, shifting point of view and making use of letters and reports as part of her narrative, Tiptree tells of a worldwide epidemic of sexual violence against women that is rapidly destroying the reproductive capability of Homo sapiens. "A potential difficulty for our species," a scientist in the story explains, "had always been implicit in the close linkage between the behavioral expressions of aggression/predation and sexual reproduction in the male" (69).

In Tiptree's short story, this difficulty becomes fatal to our ongoing existence. Male sexual aggression is transformed into homicide, rationalized by a world religion that teaches that males must give up the old way of perpetuating their kind in preparation for a new revelation. "Man must purify and show God a clean world. . . . as long as man depends on the old filthy animal way God won't help him. When man gets rid of his animal part which is woman, this is the signal God is awaiting. Then God will reveal the new true clean way, maybe angels will come bringing new souls, or maybe we will live forever, but it is not our place to speculate, only to obey" (59). Angels of a sort do arrive, but only Dr. Anne Alstein, possibly the last woman in the world, hiding out in the wilds of Canada disguised as a boy, perceives the irony of

their annunciation. For the "angel" she comes on in the woods near Hudson Bay is, in fact, not an angel at all but a "real estate agent."

I think they've done whatever it is to us [Dr. Alstein realizes]. Made us kill ourselves off.

Why? Well, it is a nice place, if it wasn't for the people. How do you get rid of people? Bombs, death rays—all very primitive. Leave a big mess. Destroy everything, craters, radioactivity, ruin the place.

This way there's no muss, no fuss. Just like what we did to the screwfly. Pinpoint the weak link, wait a bit, while we do it for them. Only a few bones around; make good fertilizer. (75)

As in the first of the Star Trek films, in which humankind appears to be only a "carbon-based infestation" of Earth, so our species seems to this higher race not a creature made in the image of God but a mere annoying pest, capable of, and deserving, destruction through manipulation of breeding practices. "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods," Gloucester insists in *King Lear*. "They kill us for their sport." In "The Screwfly Solution," such a surmise becomes quite a bit more than a simile.

In classes over the last few years I have asked students to consider these grim and depressing visions, my intentions partly experimental, and they have most often responded with something like revulsion. Many, I think, have taken me to be a kind of species-quisling because of my traitorous fascination with and admiration for them. But my students have misread the intent of these authors and of their teacher; they have misconstrued the tone in which these prophecies were offered. They were inspired, I would judge, by something more profound than misanthropy, and they represent more than a step beyond the requisite acceptance of death as a fate, more than a longing (in Shakespeare's words) "To rush into the secret house of death,/Ere death dare come to us." They prove, in fact, the validity of Santayana's perplexing suggestion that "the only true dignity of man is his capacity to despise himself." Not just indignation but dignity shines through them, a dignity no mere suicide note would show; a dignity which accompanies all unflinching contemplation of what I would like to call the audition of history and the vocation of man.

We stand at a crossroads in the history of our species. In a special way it is like that crossroads at which the primate stood when he was compelled to leave his tree existence. And yet it is also quite unlike any previous experience of the species. While the creature who had been driven from his home in the trees had millions of years in which to adjust to new and danger-filled surroundings, we have been thrown by violently accelerated technological development into a situation in which we must make our choice with the utmost quickness and must choose deliberately, not haphazardly as always before. It was during the last generation that our civilization reached the critical threshold. We may have but a single generation in which to gain control over our collective conduct and to keep our world from becoming one of those whose evolution tested the possibilities of mind—and failed.

Rolf Edberg, *At the Foot of the Tree*

What humankind calls history, Edberg seems to imply, is in fact our audition: "a planetary test" to determine whether we deserve to have the leading role on Earth.

Once, there seemed to be no question of our preeminence, Had not Genesis told us that "the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the Earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the Earth and upon all the fishes of the sea: into your hands are they delivered"? Had we not then gone on to develop the kind of psyche that would make these words seem like a self-fulfilling prophecy? Had not our exalted and self-congratulatory humanism in its obsessed modern form come to convince humankind into "thinking that we are actually learning how to steer the planet in its orbit" (Ehrenfeld, *Arrogance* 16)?

Dixon, Hawkes, Bateson, Foucault, and the rest see humankind accepting the failure of its audition with equanimity. But we may not choose to do so. Up to this point in history we have certainly not behaved as though the Earth would one day not be ours. Rather, as Edgar Quinet observes in *La Creation*, in the course of its evolution Homo sapiens has managed to convince itself that it "had so thoroughly taken possession of the Earth, that it could now belong only to him." Thus we have come to envision the Earth without us as meaningless, an "orphaned . . . sepulchre . . . in perpetual mourning for vanished man." And this conviction, Quinet stresses, cannot be easily erased. A creature with infinite presumption, we are not and never

will be "one of those kings who survive their dethronement"; we will never accept a secondary role, will never accept a successor to the throne; will not be an understudy (quoted in Rostand 94-95). Like the "insupportable infante gate" we are (the phrase is Levi-Strauss's; see Huckle 388), we may respond to the inability to have our way with the Earth by trying to ensure that there will be no play at all if we cannot have the lead. If humanity must go down in defeat, Quinet implies, we may well decide to take the Earth down with us.

In "The Sabbath," W. H. Auden offers a vision of a seemingly failed audition and of nature's "new equilibrium" once man is gone which, on the surface, resembles Teasdale's but which offers an ironic twist at the poem's end that makes his vision of man's end consonant with Quinet's grave reminders about man's obstinacy. "The Sabbath" Auden describes is the "Seventh Day of Creation" which finally arrives after man's apparent demise. In the poem's first two stanzas Auden tells of Earth's creatures as they discover our disappearance:

Waking on the Seventh Day of Creation,
They cautiously sniffed the air:
The most fastidious nostril among them admitted
That fellow was no longer there.

Scouts are sent out in search of "his presence," but they find nothing except what he left behind, his ecological legacy: "holes in the earth, /Beaches covered with tar./Ruins and metallic rubbish in plenty. . . ." Thinking of "that fellow's" disappearance, the animal world concludes, as Auden explains, becoming their collective voice, he "had never really smelled/Like a creature who would survive." His "birth on the Sixth had made of that day/An unnecessary interim." But in retrospect they realize that his tenure as ruler must have been just a temporary, unnatural hiatus, and they are content to return to "a natural economy" at last, now that "His Impudence" is gone. For now it is truly "The Sabbath," now, Auden explains, "Looking exactly like what it was,/The Seventh Day went on,/ Beautiful, happy, perfectly pointless," and the earnest expectations of the creatures no longer seem inclined to wait for the manifestations of the self-proclaimed sons of God. But then, out of nowhere, man returns, and in characteristic fashion; as if from the grave, "A rifle's ringing crack/Split their Arcadia wide open, cut/Their Sabbath nonsense short." After all, Auden asks rhetorically in the poem's last stanza, "For

whom did they [the world's creatures] think they had been created?" Had they not been "delivered" into man's hands as part of an ancient covenant? And the animals' answer to Auden's query is, of course, yes. "That fellow was back,/More bloody minded than they remembered,/More godlike than they thought." Born again from out of his seeming extinction, man, in Auden's vision, learns nothing from his close call with death. It only makes him that much more of a fanatic (fanatics being, as Santayana said, those who redouble their efforts when they have forgotten their goal).

But is it not possible to imagine man surviving his brush with death as a creature less tyrannical, less "bloody minded" than "His Impudence"? Might not such an encounter inspire a re-vocation in which man's supremacy *is* revoked but transformed?

The proverbial wisdom of Chinese Taoism teaches that when an ordinary man attains self-knowledge he becomes a sage, but when a sage achieves enlightenment he becomes an ordinary man. Can there be an evolutionary equivalent to this circular progression, but in the mind and heart of a species? Is it possible that a creature like man, after having developed in the course of his emergence from the natural world a powerful, masterful, almost unnatural intelligence, might surmount it not through the further acceleration of intelligence, but from a wise submission to the natural and the earthly? "Man's life is thought," William Butler Yeats wrote in "Meru," prophesying on our fate, "And he, despite the terror, cannot cease/ Ravening through century after century,/Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come/*Into the desolation of reality*" (my emphasis).

In at least one contemporary imagination of disaster, the end of man guides him toward *this* desolation, toward a life-in-death in which he can endure, ironically succeeding in his audition, only as an adapted being, accommodated at last to creatureliness, vulnerability, finiteness, to his place on earth.

IV

The day is not far distant when humanity will realize that biologically is is faced with a choice between suicide and adoration.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*

Faustian characters as we are, we cannot imagine "rest," "Nirvana," "eternity," except as a cessation of all activity in other words, as death. What our argument is reaching for is not death rather than life but a reconciliation of life and death. We have therefore to sustain the possibility of activity (life) which is also at rest.

Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death*

The very title of Wendell Berry's "Song in a Year of Catastrophe" (*Collected Poems* 117-18; written in 1968) announces its relevance for any consideration of the audition of mankind. But the title also raises an immediate question: how can a poet make a song out of catastrophe? He can do so only if the apocalypse he confronts is (in the root meaning of the word) at the same time a revelation about his own soul's path and the human journey for which he stands as spokesman. Berry's song is indeed such a revelation.

Haunted by an ominous voice, the poet learns—is forewarned—that "It can't last" and since Berry, as we have seen, has long been one of modernity's most searching and eloquent critics, we have no doubt what his seemingly vague pronoun refers to: he is thinking of the reckless, careless, Archimedean, "let them eat the future" (*Unsettling* 59) style of modern life and the arrogance of a species for which shame is "the responsibility of an honest person."² The voice warns Berry that he must "harden" himself against the coming end, that he must prepare to lose all that he thought he loved, advising that he must begin to "live close to the ground" and to "learn the darkness." For the future of which it warns will require, it seems, the refinement of earthiness and dark, intuitive, nonrational, yin-like powers, not the abstraction, rationality, lucidity, and Faustian activity so cherished by the world about to die; it will require the powers of the Woman as Great as the World, not those of the Wind.

The poet obeys, and with nearly miraculous results. Immersed in the Earth and in the leaves which cover it in this "autumn of catastrophe," he discovers other voices, not like the portentous one that begins his transformation, but earthly

² To be ashamed of one's species is a strange and sickening emotion," Berry writes in *The Unforeseen Wilderness*. "It goes against instincts of kinship and self-regard. And yet it is an emotion that I and I think a great many others have to contend with more and more often. . . . I would try to get rid of such emotions if I did not recognize their truth. In these times they are part of the responsibility of an honest person. I believe that I would be a dangerous person if I did not feel them."

presences that, he tells us, "had been dead/in my tongue years before my birth": dead, that is, in his language itself which, in an age of science and objectivity, cannot easily give expression to the sense of mystery at the heart of our being-in-the-world and his relation to the world's simple, autochthonous things. These voices, once heeded in our audition, again have their say in the poet's hearing. But the voice of warning still plagues him, mocks him that he has "not yet come close enough," not yet truly accepted the Earth for which it serves as spokesman. It offers to him models for behavior in the woodcock and the quail and the mole—creatures almost indistinguishable in their feathers and coats from their surroundings. It suggests that he, too, blend in with his world—that he no longer concern himself with standing out. It instructs him to make his very life a mimicry of the place in which he lives.

For the farmer shall wear
the greenery and the furrows
of his fields, and bear
the long standing of the woods.

Such a role has seldom appealed to us, of course; atonement with the Earth, cessation of perpetual activity, an end to our perpetual longing, have always seemed a humiliating prospect, equivalent, in fact, to death—as the poet recognizes:

And I asked, 'You mean death then?'

But it is a victorious death, bringing with it the promise of a rebirth, as the voice declares, instructing the poet to

Die into what the Earth requires of you.

Letting "go all holds," his being and the Earth's coincide; his will, finally adapted, becomes its will as he sinks into its sheltering whole "like a hopeless swimmer," in full possession now, for the first time, of his true humanity, feeling himself come

fully into the ease
and the joy of that place,

all my lost ones returning.

Only in defeat, only in humiliation, Berry's "Song" proclaims, does his audition become acute enough to alert him to the possibility of a new vocation. For with the longed-for role as Earth's master revoked, man, it seems, can perhaps accept revocation, becoming a creature who views itself not as lord of all it surveys but (in George Steiner's words, paraphrasing Martin Heidegger) as "a privileged listener and respondent to existence" in "a relation of audition" to the Earth, "a relation of extreme responsibility, custodianship to and for" (31-32). It remains to be seen if our kind can learn enough wisdom to willingly accept such a part.

We have met the enemy and he is us, not the woman as great as the world, not Tiptree's real estate agent. If our chances of survival are to be more than "a snowball's in hell," then our vivid imagining of the extinction of man must bring with it such psychological insight but seen from an ecological and evolutionary perspective: the realization that, in the words of another poetic listener, Robert Frost.

Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves
We were withholding from our land of living
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.