

Chapter 1

The Other Human: On William Golding's *The Inheritors*

Mr Neander's great merit isn't so much the simple fact of being there, but of having already been there, having been there then, before so many. Precedence is a quality no one would wish to deny Mr Neander. However much ... even before that, as further research has demonstrated – and as you yourself can confirm, isn't that right, Mr Neander? – we find traces, many traces and on a number of continents, of human beings, yes, already human humans...¹

As Italo Calvino's short story insinuates, the mysterious 'Mr Neander' with his traces compels us humans to think about the other humans *before* us, already human humans. Similarly, Marijane Allen's short poem about the Neanderthal, in a collection of short texts of prehistoric and science fiction entitled *Apeman, Spaceman*,² expresses all the ambiguity and consternation *homo sapiens* feels with regard to 'his' prehistoric past and these other human species that for some reason did not make it into the present:

'Intriguing specimen, behold the jaw...'
Beholding him, I wonder what befell
when prophets found no future to foretell.
(...)
What hunger for tomorrow had that race
evolving deathward down an aberrant track? –
limping to extinction without grace
because the Breeder overlooked some lack
unknowable to us. 'Behold the jaw...'
Unfutured race, I wonder what *it* saw.

Emblematic of all 'prehumans', the Neanderthal raises unnerving questions: all these 'unfutured races', who were they? Why was it us who survived, not them? What makes us different? And will we suffer the same fate, eventually? If we are not so unique, after all, what does it mean to be human? There is a telling shift from 'him' to 'it' in Allen's poem which prompts an even more sinister, more anxious question: how 'human' was this other human? Were there other humans *before* humanity, and what does that mean, for us and for them? Is there a dark secret that lies buried in the unrecoverable origins our 'race'? Are we the sole survivors by merit, by chance, or even worse? The guilty conscience of the sole survivor makes us wonder how to do justice to our ancestors and our lost cousins.

It is impossible to read William Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955) without these questions in mind.³ The novel is part of the subgenre of 'prehistoric fiction'. This chapter seeks to do justice to Golding's novel as a fictional intervention within the paleontological account of hominization as well as to the

¹ Italo Calvino, "Neanderthal Man (1975)", *Numbers in the Dark*, trans. Tim Parks, (London: Vintage), 177.

² Marijane Allen, "Neanderthal", In Leon E. Stover and Harry Harrison, eds., *Apeman, Spaceman*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 19.

³ William Golding, *The Inheritors*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1955). All references are to this edition. Golding wrote another 'prehistoric' (short) novel, "Clonk Clonk", which interestingly thematises and subverts notions of gender difference within a fictional tribe of prehistoric humans. However, it does so in the form of a fable and therefore cannot compete with the metaphysical depth of the paleoanthropological questions raised in *The Inheritors*. "Clonk Clonk" can be found in William Golding, *The Scorpion God: Three Short Novels*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 63-114.

critical discussion it received in literary studies and linguistics. However, it also engages with some more general philosophical problems that the disappearance of our human ‘ancestors’ and the notion of ‘ancestralinity’ raise more generally. In Golding’s own words:

We know nothing. We look at the appalling mystery of plain stuff. We stand where any upright food-gatherer has stood, on the edge of our own unconscious, and hope, perhaps, for the terror and excitement of the print of a single foot.⁴

The Inheritors provides such an engagement with the idea of ‘humans before humanity’ and thus provides an important narrative of how we became human.

Prehistoric fiction and ancestralinity

As a genre, prehistoric fiction plays an important part in the narrativization of human (species) identity as Nicholas Ruddick explains:

Good [prehistoric fiction] also tells us about ourselves today, but does so by reminding us of the great journey in time that we have travelled to get here. It provides speculative scenarios of *hominization*, namely, the evolutionary process that made us the kind of species that we are.⁵

Golding’s *The Inheritors* unquestionably plays an important but often neglected part in this history and the genre. In his *Literary Darwinism* (2004), Joseph Carroll writes that the “relative” and “unmerited obscurity of *The Inheritors* can be accounted for in part by its genre”.⁶ Carroll here refers more specifically to “paleolithic fictions”, which:

[b]y their very nature... do not engage a full and detailed array of modern social and psychological concerns... The minds they depict are rudimentary, the social order primitive, and the manners rough... Good Paleolithic fiction creates a world of harsh conditions in which the characters are dominated by brute necessity, driven by elemental passions, and capable of only inchoate reflection.⁷

It thus seems that paleolithic fiction, and as I would claim, fiction that is set within the prehistory of modern humans and their ‘minds’ more generally (hence: ‘prehistoric fiction’), would inevitably suffer from a lack of ‘empathy’. The characters it can depict following the rules of paleontological realism will therefore hardly appeal to the modern reader, which means that it will have a hard time creating the kind of empathy between reader and character that is generally considered to make a good story.

At first, this critical judgment does seem also apply to Golding’s *The Inheritors*, whose narrative technique “presents special difficulties”, as Carroll explains:

⁴ William Golding, “In My Ark”, In *The Hot Gates and Other Occasional Pieces*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), 105.

⁵ Nicholas Ruddick, *The Fire in the Stone: Prehistoric Fiction from Charles Darwin to Jean M. Auel*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 3 (original emphasis).

⁶ Joseph Carroll, *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 177.

⁷ Carroll, p. 177.

He speaks from within the perspective, and often from within the idiom, of the Neanderthals, that is, of inarticulate and semi-human creatures who do not themselves fully understand the events they witness.⁸

Golding – who did “serious research into paleoanthropology”⁹ – nevertheless succeeds in showing “what the world looked like from within those skulls”. For Carroll, who is in search of “adaptionist criteria of literary value” (this is the context in which he discusses Golding), the novel however manages to provide a credible Neanderthal perspective by:

- a) placing the organism in intimate cognitive relation to the physical and social conditions of its environment,
- b) regulating the proportions of sensory perception and abstract reflection in the stream of its mental events,
- c) coordinating language use with the level of cognitive complexity, and
- d) calibrating the horizon of temporal anticipation suitable to its behaviour.¹⁰

I will return to some of these criteria in more detail below. Following Carroll’s reading of *The Inheritors* will enable me to present an overview of the kind of interpretation the novel has been receiving. The most remarkable thing about *The Inheritors* is not only the fact that it is one of the very few and successful (although it remains to be clarified what ‘success’ means in this context) attempts to write from the perspective of ‘another (human) species’, but also that it foregrounds, thematises and problematizes the inevitably modern-anthropocentric viewpoint of the ‘successor’ that the contemporary reader will necessarily have to embody. The most remarkable feature of the novel, in fact, is that it is written from the point of view of the Neanderthal character Lok (at least up to the middle of the eleventh (of twelve) chapters). On page 216 (of 233) the insider’s Neanderthal perspective on the strange and violent goings-on during the first encounter with the successor species (i.e. our direct ancestors), a tribe of Cro-Magnon people, is abandoned and a third person and apparently omniscient narrator provides the first ‘outside’ perspective and description of Lok, as “The red creature” – in a move that is similar to the pronominal turn in Allen’s poem above, namely in the form of a pronominal shift from ‘he’ to ‘it’). In chapter twelve, the narrator slips into a Cro-Magnon character, the shaman Tuami, who provides the reader with the viewpoint of ‘modern man’, the inheritor, i.e. us. However, there is no triumphalism in Golding’s change of perspective, the irreconcilable difference between the two visions and versions of events remains unresolved, even though our empathy must ‘naturally’ lie with Tuami, our ancestor (what exactly the ‘nature’ of this ‘naturally’ means, in this context, will be discussed later). As Carroll explains:

Golding’s sympathy for Tuami is not less than his sympathy for Lok. In the final words of the novel – “he could not see if the line of darkness had an ending” – Golding’s own perspective and that of his Cro-Magnon protagonist converge into a single point of view... The interplay between the points of view of the Neanderthal and the Cro-Magnons provides a medium for articulating Golding’s ambivalent vision of human nature, and it thus mediates the largest thematic purposes of the story. The Neanderthals are both entranced and horrified by the new people. By looking at the Cro-Magnons from the Neanderthal perspective, Golding evokes the strange and singular fascination of modern humanity, with all its ingenuity, its grotesque social and mental complications, and its cruelty. From the other direction, looking at the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 179-80.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Neanderthals from the modern perspective, Golding conveys a sense of the simpler, more elemental realities of human life.¹¹

The problematic nature of Carroll's statements in this absolutely intriguing passage will hopefully become clearer as I go along. The ambivalence Carroll locates in Golding's change of narrative perspective is very much his own and, from a humanist point of view, inevitably that of every modern human reader-survivor. In other words, it is the ambivalence that derives from the very idea of evolution and thus from the point of view of the (sole) survivor's 'reverse teleology'.¹² It is this ambivalence that encourages me here to strategically counter the 'post-' or latecoming of the survivor with the 'pre-', 'proto-', 'paleo-', 'ana-' etc. dimensions contained in the phrase *before humanity*.

Before Humanity challenges the retrospective teleology and inevitability of 'inheriting' (the future). It also questions the kind of humanist morality that Carroll attributes to Golding and his "large and generous moral nature":

Without preaching, without didacticism, simply by enabling us to share in his own achievement of imaginative sympathy, Golding gives new depth and breadth to our capacity for sharing in the experience of other creatures. He takes us outside the limitations of our own particular identities and our own local cultural values. He enables us to register our common nature not merely on the level of "human universals" but on the level of universals that extend beyond the characteristics of our own species ... one of his central motives is the insight into the experience of other sentient creatures. Neither the Neanderthals nor the Cro-Magnons function merely to reflect ideological values or to serve as vehicles for narcissistic fantasy. They are not idealized, sentimentalized, or glamorized. They are treated with respect as figures of inherent interest and value.¹³

The attempt here is to legitimate an idea of an inclusive 'human nature' by turning Golding's novel into a moral project while playing down its 'didacticism'. It is interesting to see the use of 'sympathy' and 'experience' as the ultimate validation of 'human universals' that nevertheless stresses the particularism and the difference of the two species – Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons. The parallel between this discourse and that of contemporary multiculturalism and 'race' is striking. It betrays the ambiguity – the true moral dilemma – that underlies Golding's text (and with it, arguably, the entire discipline of paleontology): what to do – from the modern point of view – with all these 'other humans'? How to 'classify' them, especially in terms of race. A question that inevitably has as many contemporary as prehistoric reverberations and a question which demonstrates the necessity of a critical posthumanist approach to what it must have meant (then) and what it (still) means now to be human. For, at the very centre of the passage from Carroll just quoted, hidden behind the three dots after "our own species", lies the crux of the problem, namely the irreducible difference *within* the human species and the question of what to do with it:¹⁴

When the point of view shifts to the Cro-Magnons, the whole cognitive landscape changes. It becomes more complex and sequential; there are layers of suppression and deceit, complex

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹² On the notion of 'reverse teleology' see my discussion of Dawkins in the "Introduction: Before ...", above.

¹³ Carroll, *Literary Darwinism*, pp. 182-83.

¹⁴ For a recent and powerful articulation of this critique of the 'liberal humanist' universalism behind universalist desire of 'human recognition' and its failure to see its own implication in racial and animal 'abjection', see Zakiyya Iman Jackson's *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

emotions of shame, embarrassment, and remorse, and the capacity for complex symbolic thought.¹⁵

It seems that just like the very idea of evolution as such, Golding's narrative shift is all about the comparison of difference, about development and progress, cultural refinement and (Western) civilization, barely disguised in the notion of 'complexification'. Let me stress, however, that this is not to question the legitimacy of evolution as the best explanation there is for the biological development of human and nonhuman life but rather an investigation into some of its conceptual and philosophical moves and narrative strategies.

Before I return to Golding's text and his critics, however, I would like to further contextualize the discussion of the genre of prehistoric or paleolithic fiction and the curious temporal logic it shares with the idea of *before humanity* that is my main concern. Prehistoric fiction is closely aligned with science fiction, and the online *Science Fiction Encyclopedia (SFE)*, which carries entries on "Prehistoric SF", "Origin of Man" and "Evolution", explains why this is so:

Prehistoric fiction became yoked to sf partly because ... H G Wells effectively annexed the territory with "A Story of the Stone Age" (1897). Another notable prehistoric work by Wells, part essay and part narrative, is "The Grisly Folk" (1921). These short pieces embody two recurring themes of prehistoric sf: the discovery and development of weapons or other tools in the first, and the assumed clash between modern humans and their Neanderthal predecessors in the second.¹⁶

¹⁵ Carroll, *Literary Darwinism*, p. 182.

¹⁶ "Prehistoric SF", *SFE Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/prehistoric_sf (accessed 13 December 2020). There is also a well-documented website dedicated to the literary genre of prehistoric fiction available at http://www.trussel.com/f_prehis.htm (accessed 13 December 2020). See also Marc Angenot and Nadia Khouri's "An International Biography of Prehistoric Fiction", *Science Fiction Studies* 8.1 (1981): 38-53; and the rejoinder by Gordon B. Chamberlain, "The Angenot-Khoury Bibliography of Prehistoric Fiction: Additions, Corrections, and Comment", *Science Fiction Studies* 9.3 (1982): 342-46. The first monograph dedicated to the genre of prehistoric fiction is Charles de Paolo's *Human Prehistory in Fiction*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2003). However, De Paolo produces a quite problematic classification of prehistoric fiction, namely according to its either critical, progressive or doctrinal, regressive representations of human prehistory. In what he refers to as "the authenticity problem" prehistoric fictional texts may be appreciated according to what extent they engage with the scientific realism of their time. On this account, both Well's hominids in "The Grisly Folk", and Golding's revision in *The Inheritors* are faulted by De Paolo as "scientifically flawed" and "discredited by modern paleoanthropology" (p. 5): "Rehabilitation [of the Neanderthals] is Golding's intention, but his efforts are unsuccessful because they rely on unauthorized science" (p. 144). The problem with De Paolo's "authenticity problem", however, is that it invests too much authority, and maybe believes a little too uncritically, in the accuracy of scientific discourse, rather than acknowledging the inevitably speculative nature of science's 'realism' as far as the 'great outdoors' (in Meillassoux's sense; see my discussion in the "Introduction: Before ... ", above) is concerned. The second and more recent monograph on the topic, Ruddick's *The Fire in the Stone*, is more inclusive in that respect. As Ruddick explains:

[T]hose 'restorations' of human prehistory... are worth reading as fiction, regardless of their scientific accuracy... Today, we know so much more about the great antiquity and tangled lineage of our species, and we may often be tempted to chastise early prehistorians for their naiveté or presumption. Yet it is probably more useful to demonstrate as frankly as possible what these pioneers felt or believed about human prehistory and to explain why they did so. (pp. xi-xii)

H.G. Wells's story "The Grisly Folk" can be found in *The Complete Short Stories of H.G. Wells* [1927], (London: Ernest Benn, 1970), 605-22. Wells's account of the Neanderthal as the primordial "ogre" of Western culture occurs in his *The Outline of History* [1920], (London: Cassell, 1972). Finally, for an excellent and comprehensive

Golding's *The Inheritors*, which begins with an epigraph from H.G. Wells's "The Grisly Folk", which it takes as a counterpart, is also mentioned in the entry, namely as a novel developing "the gulf between old and new cultures ... with considerable, even hallucinatory, force from the Neanderthal viewpoint".

The analogy between prehistoric fiction and science fiction is further developed in a collection of stories entitled *Dawn of Time: Prehistory Through Science Fiction*. In their introduction, the editors give the following justification for aligning both genres:

Science fiction is generally thought to be fiction about the future. But that is very much an oversimplification. Science fiction is, in Robert A. Heinlein's phrase, *speculative* fiction; and, though it is perhaps more natural to speculate about the future than the past, times gone by are just as fertile grounds for science-fictional speculations as times to come ... What science fiction primarily does, after all, is to carry the reader into an unknown situation and explore a realm of strangeness in meticulous and logical detail – and why is the Mars of A.D. 2500 any more strange, any less accessible to experience, than the Earth of sixty million B.C.? Both are distant, bizarre, alien places, and our only hope of "knowing" them is through imaginative reconstruction of scientific projection.¹⁷

The speculative nature of the 'great outdoors' (as Meillassoux calls the time *before* humanity, but also the time *after* humanity), is what is shared by both prehistoric and futural, or one might say 'posthistoric' (SF) fiction.

For my present purpose, it is worth pointing out that the second shared element between prehistoric and science fiction identified by the editors of *Dawn of Time* is that both rely on "the imaginative reconstruction of scientific projection" – or, a specifically *scientific* imaginary, that is to say. Indeed, the entire discipline of paleontology would be unthinkable without such a scientific imaginary, as the editors add:

These stories generally have attempted to work within established scientific knowledge, bringing the past to life by using paleontological and anthropological data as the foundation for imaginative speculations. Once again, then, science fiction serves as our time machine. We can never directly experience the Cretaceous or the Pleistocene or even the late Paleolithic, any more than we can visit the world of a million years hence; but we can make vicarious journeys of the imagination to those far harbors of time, and come away enriched, stimulated, aware of the texture and quality of those other worlds of time, and heightened in our perceptions not only of our own era but of those that went before.¹⁸

It is the fascination with time travel, both forward and backward, that the vehicle of the time machine carries. The time-machine-imaginary more generally serves as a metaphor of narrative,

survey in French of prehistoric literature, which also discusses in detail Golding's *The Inheritors*, see Claudine Cohen's *L'Homme des origines: Savoirs et fictions en préhistoire*, (Paris: Seuil, 1999), esp. chapter 8.

¹⁷ Robert Silverberg, Martin Harry Greenberg and Joseph D. Olander, "Introduction", *Dawn of Time: Prehistory Through Science Fiction*, New York: Elsevier, 1979, p. 9 (original emphasis). The collection also contains an interesting reversal of the scenario presented in *The Inheritors* where Lok is presented as a human who is undergoing the transformation from Neanderthal to Cro-Magnon. Lok is here understood as the *literal* (missing) link (cf. Cleve Cartmill's short story "The Link", pp. 100-114). It is worth noting that the collection further contains "The Gnarly Man" (by L. Sprague de Camp), a short story that presents a contemporary Neanderthal "survivor" (pp. 132-156).

¹⁸ Silverberg et al., p. 10.

capable of producing fictional *experience* that, in turn, is enabled by scientific progress. However, it is equally vital for producing the kind of (projective) cognitive access that science needs to progress.

There are also important differences between prehistoric fiction (pf) and science fiction (sf), however, as Nicholas Ruddick points out:

Sf is pre-eminently the fiction of the human or posthuman future. Both sf and pf are speculative genres, though in slightly different ways. The logic of temporality – time's one-way arrow – debars all witnesses to the future. In contrast, there *were* human witnesses to prehistory or we would not be here today. Yet there are no eyewitness *accounts* of prehistory: by definition, a surviving eyewitness account of an event signifies that history has begun. The prehistoric past and the future are both ultimately unknowable from the position of the present. The *historic* past, on the other hand, defined by its bequest of written documentation to the present, may be undecidable but it is not unknowable.¹⁹

It is the knowledge of the *undecidability* of the human prehistoric past that is captured by what Meillassoux refers to as ‘ancestralit  ’. It is the knowledge that other humans came *before* the human – witnesses whose accounts were never recorded – that informs the speculation at work in pf and which gives it a somewhat more ‘real’ (but also ‘material’) dimension, in the psychoanalytic sense, namely as an unrecoverable, obliterated and maybe repressed truth that nevertheless structures, traumatically and symptomatically, the imaginary and symbolic order of surviving humans.

While pf may be understood as a “speculative literary genre dependent on extrapolations from scientific or quasi-scientific discourse”,²⁰ there is also another, namely an ‘anthropological’, route that may serve as a narrative ‘time machine’ to both prehistoric and posthistoric times. As the *SFE* points out: “the attitude and method of sf writers are easily comparable to the difficult but fundamental task facing anthropologists, who must detach themselves from the inherited attitudes of their own society and immerse themselves in the life of an alien culture without ever losing their ability to stand back from their experience and take the measure of that culture as objectively as possible”.²¹ This alien perspective – alien past, or alien future – may thus require an “alien phenomenology” (to use Ian Bogost’s phrase encapsulating his take on speculative realism and object-oriented-ontology).²² And it is precisely such an alien phenomenology that is at work in Golding’s *The Inheritors*, as I would maintain.

It is no coincidence that Peter Alterman refers to “Aliens in Golding’s *The Inheritors*”.²³ According to Alterman, the novel “makes use of science-fiction concepts” like “alien creatures, carefully shown to be non-human [who] meet a monstrous threat which destroys them”.²⁴ The peculiar reversal, however, lies in the fact that the aliens are *not* the monsters this time. Instead, it is *us*, i.e. the surviving humans, who are the monsters. Moreover, the superhuman sensory capacity of Golding’s

¹⁹ Ruddick, p. 3 (original emphasis).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²¹ “Anthropology”, *SFE Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/anthropology> (accessed 6 September 2018). See also the important collection *Anthropology Through Science Fiction*, eds. Carol Mason, Martin Harry Greenberg and Patricia Warrick, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1974). In their introduction, the editors point out the shared interest in technology by anthropology and sf. Both are concerned with the question “how much control does a society have over its technology?” (p. ix). And both could be said to be (proto-)posthumanist in the sense that they “have looked for the commonalities of ‘humanness’ and tried to account for the differences that divide us” (x).

²² Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

²³ Peter S. Alterman, “Aliens in Golding’s *The Inheritors*”, *Science Fiction Studies* 5.1 (1978): 3-10.

²⁴ Alterman, p. 3.

Neanderthals, their moral superiority, their psychic and emotional differences, their telepathic ‘mind-sharing’ and their nonhuman memories, clearly mark their ‘alienness from human experience’ in having ‘other-than-human’ minds:

The Neanderthals have further sensory characteristics which differentiate them from *Homo sapiens*. These traits, while secondary to the major differences of hearing, smelling, and touch, serve to relate them more firmly to the natural landscape, to reveal more fully their difference from the new men. They have excellent night vision, for example, and they can inhibit their scent. As befits creatures who exist almost exclusively in nature, they are furry. To our eyes, they are animal-like.²⁵

As with every alien, the “purpose served by the alien beings in *The Inheritors* is, then, to comment upon the very nature of human modes of thought, perception, and behaviour”, as Alterman explains. The Neanderthals “define what is human and what is not, by contrast and comparison”.²⁶ Since aliens, telepathy and superhuman sensory experience “are tools from the science fiction writer’s bag”, Alterman concludes that in Golding’s case “science fiction can no longer be differentiated from other forms of fiction”, including prehistoric fiction.²⁷ One might therefore say that both sf and pf share in an imaginary where science fiction and science fact become mutually embroiled. In other words, they are partaking in ‘science faction’,²⁸ or, as Steven Shaviro writes:

Fictions and fabulations are often contrasted, or opposed, to scientific methods of understanding the world. But in fact, there are powerful resonances between them; they are both processes of *speculative extrapolation*.²⁹

The Inheritors: morality, ideology, humanism

Golding himself was in fact somewhat taken aback when he was told that he was writing science fiction. In “Utopias and Antiutopias (1977)”, he nevertheless granted that he was becoming less of an “antiutopian” and more of a “moral utopian”. In fact, he concludes his account with the following plea:

It is, then, a moral question. Well, we have had *australopithecus, homo habilis, homo neanderthalensis*, Mousterian Man, Cromagnon Man, *homo sapiens* – has nature done with us? Surely we can search that capacious sleeve and find something a bit better! We had better decide we are Lamarckian and make it work. We must produce *homo moralis*, the human being who cannot kill his own kind, nor exploit them nor rob them. Then no one will need to write utopias, satires or antiutopias for we shall be inhabitants of utopia ...³⁰

The moral and neo- or even ultrahumanist concern that underlies Golding’s ‘fables’, namely how we became human, all too human, and nevertheless still not human enough, is clear from the outset. The epigraph from Wells’s *Outline of History*, in which Wells famously identifies the Neanderthal with the timeless ‘ogre’ because of his strange, ugly and hairy appearance, sets the tone. To right this

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁸ On the notion of ‘science faction’, see my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), chapter 4.

²⁹ Steven Shaviro, *Discognition*, (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 11.

³⁰ Golding, “Utopias and Antiutopias”, In *A Moving Target*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), 171-84 (here: p. 184; original emphasis).

wrong, Golding makes one of Wells's 'gorilla-like monsters' his main protagonist. It is through Lok, the Neanderthal's eyes, that the reader experiences the arrival of modern humans – our direct ancestors. As Mark Kinkead-Weeks points out:

in *The Inheritors* we have both the most wonderfully imagined of Golding's fictions because it is the most inno-sensually realized (led by eyes wholly un-sapient, non-egotistic, at one with what they see); and also a terrible focus on the nature of our difference, through our ability to understand what those innocent eyes can see but never take in. Situation after situation comes extraordinarily alive as we see through Lok's eyes, but page after page we have to decipher, between the lines, what lies behind that other kind of seeing that turns him into an image of murderous and ravenous cruelty on the rock face... It is only we who can really see in *The Inheritors*, by focusing Lok's eyes with our own.³¹

Seeing oneself through the eyes of an 'other' is the necessary detour for a number of eminently (and for many, exclusively) human conceptual operations, namely empathy, consciousness, self-reflexivity, but also narcissism, alienation and power. The implications of Golding's 'alienation device' therefore, unsurprisingly, have provoked a very mitigated response by literary critics. It is probably fair to say that Golding's second novel, after *Lord of the Flies*, has received considerably less and also much less appreciative attention. For my purposes here, and despite some obvious parallels between the first two novels,³² it is entirely irrelevant whether this critical judgment might be deserved or undeserved. A brief engagement with some of the established Golding scholarship and what it has to say about *The Inheritors*, however, will be useful to illustrate the main characterizations the work has indeed received. With regard to the representation of the 'other human', each reading reveals as much about the work as about the ideological positioning of its interpreter (my own reading and use of Golding is no exception in this, of course).

Mark Kinkead-Weeks and Ian Gregor's *William Golding: A Critical Study* (1967) is one of the earliest full-length studies of Golding's novels. Kinkead-Weeks and Gregor begin their reading of *The Inheritors* by pointing out the "opacity and puzzle" that the reader feels at the beginning of the novel, especially when coming "fresh from *Lord of the Flies*".³³ In their conclusion, however, they arrive at the verdict that "in some ways the book gives a sense of perfection; of being one of those rare novels which seems to encompass the whole of its subject".³⁴ Even though Golding's second novel may be "the most perfect of his works", they nevertheless find it of a "perfection which suggests its own limitations", which is due to its investment with what they call "archetypal myth". By this they mean, for example, that as far as character is concerned, "the search is for the being of Man rather than the complexities of the individual" and "with defining the essential nature of relationships".³⁵ For Kinkead-Weeks and Gregor, *The Inheritors* can thus only represent an intermediary stage in Golding's work as it progresses towards an "exploration of individual man in society". Needless to say that this reflects very much the 'ideology of the time' as far as literary criticism is concerned, with its emphasis on the author's greatness, the aesthetic value of (usually) his works and their social duty of portraying the liberal humanist individual.

³¹ Mark Kinkead-Weeks, "The Visual and the Visionary in Golding", In *William Golding: The Man and his Books, A Tribute on his 75th Birthday*, ed. John Carey, (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), 67.

³² For two parallel readings of both novels, see Philip Redpath's and James Gindin's contributions to the *Modern Critical Interpretations* volume, ed. Harold Bloom, *William Golding's Lord of the Flies*, (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999), 133-51 and 153-67 respectively.

³³ Mark Kinkead-Weeks and Ian Gregor, *William Golding: A Critical Study*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), 67.

³⁴ Kinkead-Weeks & Gregor, pp. 117-18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

A few years later, Virginia Tiger's reading of *The Inheritors* takes an entirely different approach.³⁶ The guiding principle Tiger takes from Golding himself is the view that "the proper end of literature is imaginative discovery; it is not the level of knowledge that literature can raise, but the level of knowing".³⁷ As Tiger writes, almost as a direct reply to Kinkaid-Weeks and Gregor:

Golding explores the possible origins of man's guilt and violence in the evolutionary appearance of *homo sapiens* but the fable, mythic in impulse, consciously tries to construct a mythopoeia relevant to contemporary man by using anthropological conventions in the same way as *Lord of the Flies* used the literary convention of the desert island.³⁸

Tiger consequently stresses the existentialist-humanist message of *The Inheritors* and the centrality of the reader to "build the bridge between the two views" and thus produce the impression that "we are the inheritors of the new conjunction".³⁹ It is our task is to "reconcile the opposites" that the encounter between the "prelapsarian" and the "new people" produces and to understand "that the downward path of the innocent and the upward path of the guilty are essentially related".⁴⁰ The dark side of becoming *homo sapiens* thus lies in this "loss of innocence": "humanity's biological and evolutionary superiority in consciousness was an incalculable asset gained at an enormous price".⁴¹ Thus, for Tiger, in line with the ambient cultural pessimism of Golding's time, he "saw guilt as the result of technological, linguistic and, and intellectual power".⁴² Golding's strategy was "to implicate [his] readers in the experience of, and responsibility for, a loss of innocence" and to share the insight that "[b]iological evolution would seem to be moral devolution".⁴³ His "moral diagnosis", according to Tiger, is that "individuals abstract from their own shortcomings and project them as a fear of something Other, which will haunt or destroy".⁴⁴ The reader is thus forced to become complicit in the 'dehumanization' process committed by the 'new people' with regard to the 'red creature', because following Golding's moral critique, "knowledge implicates us".⁴⁵ "That the sources and means of power and active creation are also the source and means of destruction is (for Golding) "humanity's long and tragic tension", as Tiger concludes.⁴⁶ So while it becomes clear that between Tiger's earlier reading, in 1974, and her revised interpretation, in 2003, the entire focus on 'the humanity of humanity' has changed and has, indeed, become once more a major issue, Tiger's (in my view) problematic conclusion, however, remains unchanged:

The effect is to deliberately complicate the possibility of us choosing between two communities: the sensuous innocence of the clown and the intellectual guilt of the artist, so that the reader experiences both the sense of loss and the sense of gain. By means of ideographic structure, defamiliarizing focalization, and confrontation scene, the reader

³⁶ Virginia Tiger, *William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery*, (London: Calder & Boyars, 1974). The chapter on *The Inheritors* was reprinted with some changes in *William Golding: The Unmoved Target*, (New York: Marion Boyars, 2003).

³⁷ Tiger, *William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery*, p. 68.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

encounters dark and light, moving beyond simple experience/guilt or simple innocence/love to an apprehension of some future possibility of reconciling binary opposites.⁴⁷

While the fundamentally humanist endeavour of ‘reconciling opposites’ – be they internal or external to ‘human nature’ – remains here intact. What seems to have changed within a few decades is the interpretation of Golding’s tone, which is now seen as somehow darker, or more desperate, maybe even tragic.

A certain ‘tragic humanism’ is however already at work in Golding’s Catholicism and the notion of ‘original sin’ that impregnates his entire work. As Arnold Johnston explains, “[f]ar from merely presenting humanity for unfavourable contrast with a gentler race, Golding offers a complex, and indeed sympathetic, exploration of man’s essential dilemma”.⁴⁸ Johnston’s reading consequently stresses a slightly less romantic (and less human) view of the Neanderthals:

the Neanderthals are marked for extinction because, like most animal species, they are controlled by their environment. Their more obviously human traits are insufficiently developed to enable them to change that environment. Thus, if *The Inheritors* is an ironic revelation of man’s fallen state, it also demonstrates that there seems no alternative to that state, no hope of a return to innocence. In Golding’s world the meek cannot inherit the earth.⁴⁹

The great difference between Tiger and Johnston – and this is usually the main point of argument in the reception of *The Inheritors*, as we will see, as well as the major point of divergence among palaeontologists more generally – turns on the ambiguity with regard to the Neanderthal’s humanity and our ‘meekness’ in refusing to see them as the ‘animals’ they really *are*. In other words, our anthropomorphism is our weakness. The positive humanist lesson that Johnston, in 1980, nevertheless manages to derive from the reversal of perspective at the end of the novel lies in the promise of some form of redemption in human art and creativity: “The possibility of redemption exists in commitment to creation rather than destruction; for Golding the primary symbol of creation is the artist, who can interpret thus, if he is heeded, the truths of the human condition”.⁵⁰ But what exactly it is that might guarantee the idea that the art of creation will not turn itself into an act of destruction remains an open question, just like the idea of a ‘human condition’ as such.

The same argument and the same quietly triumphant tone can be found in Boyd’s reading of *The Inheritors* – located somewhere between “innocence and experience”, as Boyd claims: “Our fallen nature leads to many misfortunes and enormities but it also makes possible the creation of art which has depth and emotional power of tragedy”.⁵¹ However, the use of the word ‘tragedy’ here already contains an important, existential(ist) shift. The belief is now in the *tragic* reaffirmation of humanness as part of a more intricate casuistry of redemption:

The potential in the new people for the creation of great and tragic art is perhaps one chink of light in the general gloom of *The Inheritors*. Another cause for cautious optimism is the adoption into the new people of “the new one”, the infant survivor of Lok’s people. The baby can be suckled by a human, perhaps one day there will be interbreeding between the new people and this last Neanderthal. Perhaps something of the goodness and gentleness will

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴⁸ Arnold Johnston, *On Earth and Darkness: The Novels of William Golding*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), 22.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵¹ S.J. Boyd, *The Novels of William Golding*, (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1988), 44.

thus be introduced into human kind and thus we would be the inheritors of that race too. After all, the experience of reading the novel shows that we can feel sympathy for the alien Neanderthals and that we are also capable of shame at the excess of our own kind. Our meeting with the new people is a little like the myth of Pandora's box: we uncover all the troubles and miseries in the world, but at the last there is still a token of hope.⁵²

The word 'pathetic' springs to mind – in all its senses. The humanizing (em)pathos that is supposedly generated by the reading – arguably the most fundamental legitimization of reading for modern liberal humanism – constitutes the merely *tragic* 'hope' that lies in the yearning for a better (future) human – a yearning, by the way, that still informs most contemporary forms of *transhumanism* and ideas of technological human enhancement. Becoming (more) human in this (trans)humanist sense in no way invalidates any human exceptionalism (which is the main target of critical *posthumanism*).⁵³ Boyd's argumentation sounds like some bizarre comfort may indeed be derived from the fact that at least our killing or the extinction of those poor Neanderthals – the other human – will have ultimately served a noble cause, namely the recognition of our responsibility and guilt. The whole 'logic' here turns on the curious use of 'sympathy' (or empathy, more generally, I would claim), which will be discussed in more detail below (and again in chapter 4).

The full range of contradiction as far as our sympathy with Golding's Neanderthals is concerned can be seen in another reading of the novel from the same year (1988), which in many ways takes the reverse of Boyd's humanitarian approach. It is the 'misplaced' human "sympathy for the Neanderthals over human beings" that generates 'inhumanity', according to Philip Redpath's self-declaredly 'humanist' reading of *The Inheritors*:⁵⁴ "What the third-person narrative is doing... is emphasizing the fact that the Neanderthals are not human and that we are mistaken if we sympathize and pity them as one human being for another".⁵⁵ Redpath here echoes the language-centred justification of human superiority (a point I take up below and in a separate section, "Interlude 1: Language and Evolutions", below) that runs throughout philosophy, anthropology and paleontology and for which, of course, a novel that attempts to create a linguistic *experience* of a 'pre-symbolic mind', is an easy target, in Redpath's view:

it is not the Neanderthal point of view but an approach to *their* perspective represented in *our* language. This is the language of the third-person narrative which emphasized the difference between Neanderthal and human ... As human beings neither Golding nor ourselves can enter a nonhuman consciousness when the only medium we possess through which to do so is language – our human medium of consciousness ... We cannot get out of our language any more than Lok can break into our consciousness.⁵⁶

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 45. Evidently, there is today scientific near-consensus that interbreeding between Neanderthals and *homo sapiens* did occur and that many modern humans indeed carry a small percentage of Neanderthal genes (see the discussion in the next section below). For only some of the most recent but representative scientific interventions in that respect see Ewen Callaway, "Oldest Human DNA Reveals Recent Neanderthal Mixing", *Nature* 592 (15 April 2021): 339.

⁵³ Cf. my already mentioned *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*; or Cary Wolfe's *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁵⁴ Philip Redpath, "'Dogs Would Find an Arid Space round My Feet': A Humanist Reading of *The Inheritors*", In *Critical Essays on William Golding*, ed. James R. Baker, (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1988), 33.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* (original emphasis). The problem of 'other minds' that Redpath here posits as irreducible has been a central point of argument in contemporary discussions between posthumanism, animal studies, object-oriented-ontology, speculative realism and new materialisms. A good starting point for a problematization of the cognitive and phenomenologist (maybe less so the more strictly linguistic-and hermeneutical) assumptions behind 'exclusivity' and 'solipsism' one is faced with in an encounter with 'other minds' is Thomas Nagel's

As intuitive as this claim might sound, it is of course a standpoint that relies on language as a ‘transcendental’, which means as a self-legitimating device,⁵⁷ which is highly questionable both from a logical point of view as well as from the vantage of cognitive science. Redpath’s tirade against excessively sympathetic readings of Golding’s Neanderthals takes quite an ugly (or speciesist) turn towards the end:

We do not condone the new people killing the Neanderthals, but when we see how they appear to the new people we can understand their actions – and this understanding is a possession the Neanderthals do not have ... They do not need to externalize their fear: the Neanderthals are there for them to be afraid of. When we move into the point of view of the new people we see that the red creature is regarded as a red devil driving man away from the security of the island to the wilds of the plains. If we sympathize, it must be with the terrified human beings rather than with the non-human red creatures. After all, *homo sapiens* are the inheritors referred to in the title of the book, and our last glimpse of the new people is of their sailing away into modernity. *The Inheritors* is about man and not Neanderthals.⁵⁸

It is probably unnecessary to point out how bewildering and outrageous this passage must sound for any postcolonial or ‘indigenous’ critic, especially with reference for example to the North American context of white settlement and the encounter with ‘red’ Indians. What it also vividly shows again is the underlying logic of (Western) modernity, progress, reason, enlightenment and capitalism that drives the temporal logic of rightfully assumed ‘inheritance’. While the Neanderthals lack “the human capacity to invent and change” due to their “static philosophy” which eventually leads to their extinction, “Man must keep moving, progressing, and changing”, for “to become static is to invite destruction”.⁵⁹ It is indeed this modern logic of inheritance through transformation and supersession that the phrase *before humanity* performatively problematizes, or deconstructs, so to speak.

The ideological nature of all these readings could not be more obvious. Whether they interpret the encounter between ‘modern’ humans and their ‘ancestral’ others as a fall or a fortunate fall,⁶⁰

famous essay “What is it like to be a bat?” *Mortal Questions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 165-180. See also Ian Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenology*, mentioned above, which extends the problem to our understanding ‘things’.

⁵⁷ Often attributed to structuralism (and extended by implication, but wrongly, to Derridean deconstruction or poststructuralism) as the idea of a “prison-house of language”; cf. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

⁵⁸ Redpath, pp. 39-40.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶⁰ Another reading, put forward by James Gindin, corroborated by some paleontological attempts to see the Neanderthals as our direct ancestors, not our ‘cousins’ (see below), is to understand the Neanderthals’ extinction as a “fall into humanity”:

In the process of evolution, Golding symbolically suggests, the Neanderthals have fallen into humanity and attention shifts to the already human creature who can experience guilt and self-knowledge, just as he can adapt and master the log ..., which defeated the “people” in the initial episode of the novel. The fall into humanity is both a lost innocence and a “fortunate” fall, fortunate in its recognition of human consciousness and the possibility, however dim, of redemption. (James Gindin, “The Fictional Explosion: *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors*”, In William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, *Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom, (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999), 166.

Thus, following this somewhat contorted logic, it is the contact with the humans that compromises the projected innocence of the Neanderthals. Is it *their* fall which is *our* fortune, or the reverse, one might rightly wonder.

determines what side of humanism Golding ends up on. While Redpath sees Golding as a staunch humanist who affirms the ability of human value judgment and the capability of choosing between right and wrong – “it is our humanity that *The Inheritors* helps us to understand”⁶¹ – Dickson emphasizes Golding’s ‘antihumanism’: “Ironically, Golding’s new people inherit a moral blindness that makes them externalize their own evil and then mistakenly exorcise self-made devils”.⁶²

Paleontology and the Neanderthal

The existence of the prehuman (hominins, hominids...) as well as the parallel existence of different humans raises a very specific ‘species problem’ for ‘us’, as Richard A. Richards explains: “If evolution forces us to rethink the nature of species, perhaps we must also rethink the nature of human nature ... No single species concept seems adequate”.⁶³ In a nutshell, evolution shows that there is variety across hominin species. The fact that only one of them has survived – *homo sapiens*, the descendants of Golding’s Cro-Magnon tribe – puts the question of the ‘humanity’ of the other human species (the Neanderthals, but also the Denisovans, *homo floresiensis* and more) squarely in front of us. The question is not only a scientific and classificatory one, it is maybe first and foremost ethical, as David Livingstone Smith insinuates, since it involves the ‘strategy’ of ‘dehumanization’ or ‘animalization’ between *and* within human species:

Today, every educated person knows that we are all *Homo sapiens* – members of a single species – and that the biological differences between one human group and another are trivial at most. But the dehumanizing impulse operates at the gut level, and easily overrides merely intellectual convictions. To understand why it has this power, we’ve got to answer a fundamental question. What exactly goes on when we dehumanize others?⁶⁴

The moral ambivalence that Golding’s Neanderthals have encountered in literary criticism is indeed typical and indicative of their place in human evolution more generally. David Livingstone Smith’s round-up of scientific dissensus on the relationship between the Neanderthals and *homo sapiens* captures the impression that readers of paleontological and evolutionary biology literature must have as well:

Some scientists equate *human* with both modern human beings and Neanderthals, while others speak about the split between Neanderthals and humans (in which case humans are equated with *Homo sapiens sapiens*). Others describe all members of the genus *Homo* as human, while still others reserve the term *human* for all of the species in our lineage after our common ancestor with the chimpanzee. In short, biologists’ use of *human* is all over the map. The reason for this is a simple one. Human belongs to a completely different taxonomy – a pre-Darwinian folk-taxonomy that owes much more to the great chain of being than it does to modern biological systematics. The two frameworks are incommensurable.⁶⁵

One might say that this incommensurability of human and *homo* has been used as a legitimization for numerous processes and occasions of dehumanization and rehumanization in the history of human self-explanation. Both strategies with their symbolic and real effects, however, depend on what we

⁶¹ Redpath, p. 40.

⁶² L. L. Dickson, *The Modern Allegories of William Golding*, (Tampa: University of Florida Press, 1990), 41.

⁶³ Richard A. Richards, *The Species Problem: A Philosophical Analysis*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2 and 5.

⁶⁴ David Livingstone Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), 85.

⁶⁵ Smith, p. 85.

might call prehumanization – which is the strategy my own approach in this volume is concerned with more strictly and which is the kind of reverse or reconstructed teleology that underlies so many (pseudo)evolutionary accounts of how we (apparently) *became* human. I cannot provide a very detailed survey of the field here. Instead, I will focus on some representative voices from a variety of disciplines and what they have to say about the human-Neanderthal relationship and the related problem of ancestry.

To stick with my literary example I start with the two main volumes of literary criticism on Golding that have analysed the way in which *The Inheritors* portrays the difference between Neanderthals and their successors, after which I turn to some key interventions within the more recent paleontological debate. As already indicated, de Paolo ultimately dismisses Golding's portrayal of the Neanderthals as well-intentioned but 'flawed': "Although congruent with scientific authority in 1955, his hominids are as flawed as Wells's".⁶⁶ De Paolo had already designated the Neanderthal in *The Inheritors* as "Golding's Imbecile", in an article for *Science Fiction Studies* in 2000.⁶⁷ The main criticism levelled at Golding is that he relies heavily on Marcellin Boule's 'phrenological' and 'craniometrical' misconstruction of the Neanderthals' cognitive 'deficiency' and, as a result, de Paolo argues that by "[d]irectly correlating neuroanatomy to intelligence, Golding imagines a brain dysfunction for his Neanderthal population".⁶⁸ Golding's Neanderthals thus "suffer from sensory overload and cognitive deprivation". Golding "presents a fragmented mind, the nature of which is extrapolated incorrectly from endocasts".⁶⁹ In de Paolo's view, this constitutes a "conservative image of the Neanderthal as a benign imbecile".⁷⁰

⁶⁶ De Paolo, *Human Prehistory in Fiction*, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Charles de Paolo, "Wells, Golding, and Auel: Representing the Neanderthal", *Science Fiction Studies* 27.3 (2000): 418-38.

⁶⁸ De Paolo, "Wells, Golding, and Auel", p. 428. See also the even stronger statement in his *Human Prehistory in Fiction*, p. 72:

The be "abnormally" receptive to sense stimuli but deficient in abstract thought, to my mind, may be the right balance for a cheetah pursuing a gazelle, but, for a human being in the Würm glaciation, these qualities are liabilities. I therefor agree with Redpath [discussed above]: Golding's Neanderthals are, for some reason, cognitively deficient.

De Paolo here refers to the same Redpath whom I criticised earlier for his problematic (colonial/imperialist/quasi-racist) views. De Paolo's argument that Golding's use of science was 'conservative' (see next quote) seems somewhat weak if compared to his own use of animal metaphors in the above passage. I will discuss the details of the cognitive 'alienation effects' used by Golding in the next section.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 429. Namely, "the erroneous premise that a recessive forehead (typical of the Neanderthal fossil) indicates deficiencies in regions of the brain believed responsible for rational and abstract cognition" (De Paolo, *Human Prehistory in Fiction*, p. 5).

⁷⁰ De Paolo, *Human Prehistory in Fiction*, p. 5. Even though "[r]ehabilitation is Golding's intention ... his efforts are unsuccessful because they rely on unauthorized science" (p. 144). Especially as far as such a young but central discipline to 'our own self-understanding' as paleontology or even more specifically paleoanthropology is concerned, the use of 'authorized' seems somewhat rash. Knowledge about human origins, common or uncommon ancestors discovered on a regular basis and new scientific methods due to technological developments make paleoanthropology a rather unstable and quickly changing knowledge base, as Ruddick explains (and as any survey of recent scientific texts would not fail to demonstrate):

...paleoanthropology in its short history has never been a body of knowledge stable enough to be theoretically "normalized" in the manner of, say, physics or chemistry. The study of human origins is a highly speculative hybrid discipline... based on a very small body of physical evidence. The accidental discovery of one or two fossil bone fragments has the potential to bring about a revolution in the field. (Ruddick, *The Fire in the Stone*, p. 11)

An entirely different picture is given by Ruddick whose agenda is very much opposed to de Paolo's scientism and who, on the contrary, believes that "one of the reasons that *The Inheritors* is a great novel ... is because to read it is to inhabit the consciousness of 'benign imbeciles' yet to feel no contempt for them".⁷¹ Ruddick, importantly, discusses the *racial* dimension that underlies the discussion of the Darwinian evolutionary 'descent of man' narrative, in which the Neanderthal has come to act as modern humanity's original 'racial other'. As Ruddick explains: "The atavistic Neanderthal used in racial opposition to the progressive Aryan is often found in early [prehistoric fiction] ...".⁷² In fact, whether "polygenists" (defenders of the idea of an ancient divergence of human origins and 'multiregional evolution') or "monogenists" (i.e. people who take the view that all humans developed out of one *homo* species coming 'out of Africa') are correct still, ultimately, remains to be seen. Ruddick, in any case, in a very pragmatic move (albeit still within an evolutionist framework) suggests that

we can, however, say that the truth that humanity is one species is more likely to conduce to our survival – and is therefore more important and valuable – than the truth that individual human beings show great phenotypic diversity. Similarly, pf (or indeed any artistic product) that affirms that, despite our differences, all human beings are united in their fundamental humanity, is likely to be more culturally valuable and aesthetically praiseworthy than counterclaims that our differences are unbridgeable because of primal racial incompatibilities.⁷³

As pragmatic and commonsensical as this proposition might sound, it is not without its own problems. It is indeed unclear how this well-intentioned approach would differ from humanist universalism and the very notion of human nature which is generally contested by posthumanism. Nevertheless, it is quite obvious that early *dehumanization* and subsequent *rehumanization* attempts of the Neanderthal, whether paleoanthropological or literary, are necessarily connected to contemporary attitudes towards race. As Ruddick writes, with reference to Golding's *The Inheritors*:

William Golding, writing with Wells in mind in the aftermath of the Second World War, would suggest in *The Inheritors* that there was a human disposition to genocide that long predated Nazi Germany. Be it in the Upper Paleolithic or today, our inhibitions against murder can be overridden if we can be persuaded to view our victims as biologically subhuman.⁷⁴

As a result, it is a discipline that is "ideologically highly charged" due to what it "promises to reveal about our origins *and* it is extremely vulnerable to subjective distortion because the objects of its scrutiny are very closely related to the scrutineers themselves" (pp. 11-12).

⁷¹ Ruddick, *The Fire in the Stone*, p. 12. Ruddick's follow-on claim that "our sympathies are enlarged even as we are brought harshly up against the constraints of our human nature" (p. 12), will occupy me in the section on empathy, below.

⁷² Ruddick, p. 154.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 155. As Ruddick goes on to explain with regard to the cultural reactions to the first fossil finds of Neanderthals in the 19th century:

Neanderthal limb bones are relatively more massive than most modern humans' and the brow ridges of Neanderthal skulls are more prominent. In the Darwinian aftermath it was almost inevitable that these features would recall the gorilla, the most massive living ape and the one with the largest superciliary ridge. (158)

The figure of the 'ape/man' that this comment alludes to, is eminently relevant for the *before humanity* conundrum and is therefore the focus of a separate section (see "Interlude 3: Ape/Man", below).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

Golding's 'ironic inversion' of racial stereotypes – his portrayal of the Neanderthals as peaceful and the Cro-Magnon as cannibalistic and violent – can thus be said to be inspired by an anti-racist humanist desire for an inclusive and essential human identity.

The ambiguity and unease that provokes either a strong emotional defence of the Neanderthal or an equally strong sense of modern superiority lies in the fact that the Neanderthal is not only 'our' primary, primate and primal *racial* other but also our *ontological* other more generally. This is, in fact, what constitutes the imperative aspect contained in the phrase *before humanity*: as survivors we stand before this incredible ontological *injustice* – why us, not them? What happened to them while we became modern (i.e. 'fully') human? Neanderthals can function as our other because of relatively numerous and well-preserved fossil finds – which is related to the Neanderthals' customary burying of their dead. We thus know their anatomy better than that of any other hominids, which somewhat overdetermines the relatively few but significant anatomical differences between Neanderthals and modern humans (their stockiness, compactness, muscularness, etc.).

The biggest mystery that surrounds them, however, remains the manner of and reason for their disappearance, as well as that of their legacy – all subject of both intensive scientific research and both fictional and fact-based speculation. The main biological, evolutionary and paleoanthropological shift since the archaeological discovery of the Neanderthal has been from questions of ancestry to questions of interbreeding. Since Neanderthals and Cro-Magnon had coexisted for tens of thousands of years, it is clear that the Neanderthals and 'us' are not direct relations, but 'brothers' (or, indeed, cousins) at most, i.e. extended family with common ancestors. And since extinction usually requires a reason, and reasons are used by way of justification – this is how reverse teleology works – the question arises: what was the Neanderthals' 'deficiency', or why did they fail to 'adapt'? Why did they not survive? Was it for ecological reasons (climate change, increased competition for food or overexploitation); or more demographic ones like illnesses, the small size of their communities, low life-expectancy; or indeed cultural ones, like their apparently less well developed symbolic thought and the resulting 'underperformance' as far as hunting techniques and technological innovation more generally are concerned? While the hypothesis – evoked in Golding's *The Inheritors* – of a direct confrontation between Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons remains probable, the notion of a radical supersession (i.e. a genocide) of Neanderthals by the Cro-Magnons has been more or less dropped due to lack of evidence and the gradualness of the Neanderthals' disappearance. A connection between 'our being here' and 'their absence', however, cannot be denied, and hence the *before humanity* conundrum remains intact, probably as long as we and our species identity persist, or until *homo sapiens sapiens* is in turn superseded by its potential successors.⁷⁵

I begin my short and admittedly highly selective survey of paleoanthropological literature on the encounter with the Neanderthals with Robert Foley. The title of his *Humans Before Humanity* (1995) signals an affinity with my own approach, even though it does not exploit the multiple meanings of the word 'before' as such. Foley understands paleoanthropology as that branch of 'paleobiology' that is concerned with the question of "under what conditions will the human phenotype be adaptive... in terms of how particular features gave hominids and humans advantages over contemporary competitive alternatives at particular times".⁷⁶ Even though Foley does not discuss Neanderthals in much detail, his account is helpful in what it says about extinction more generally: "The problem of

⁷⁵ Clive Finlayson articulates this most clearly in his *The Humans Who Went Extinct: Why Neanderthals Died Out and We Survived*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). The question whether evolution continues and whether humans are still subject to or maybe, thanks to biotechnology, subject of evolution is a question that the debate around the transhumanist vision of posthumans has reignited. I will be dealing with this aspect more directly in chapter 4 and the conclusion to this volume.

⁷⁶ Robert Foley, *Humans Before Humanity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 173.

extinctions is one of the most fascinating and poorly understood in human evolutionary biology".⁷⁷ More importantly, Foley does in fact clearly spell out the intense fascination the phrase *before humanity* holds:

There may be only one living species in the hominid family, but in the past there have been many more. The extinct hominids demonstrate the continuity between humans and other apes. In other words, they show that the principle of continuity applies as much to humans as to other animals. Extinct hominid species also show that the perceived gap between humans and other animals – one basis for arguing that evolutionary ideas do not apply to humans – is an illusion. It is created by the accident of extinction. If living apes become extinct, then the gap will become greater; if a living Neanderthal were to be found in the tundra of Siberia, the gap would have become smaller, and yet nothing would actually have changed in humans.⁷⁸

What Foley terms "humans before humanity" contains all those hominids – Neanderthals included – who through their fossilised bones give us access to who we are today. What is intriguing in this instrumentalization of the 'other humans', however, is that it still seems to require at least their partial dehumanization: "Humans before humanity were not truly humans, but species in their own right that survived in many cases for hundreds of thousands of years". This, according to Foley, is a necessary claim to counter the reverse teleology used to explain the sole survival of one hominid species mentioned above: "They did not exist because they were 'evolving into humans' but because they had adaptations that enhanced their survival" (and, by implication, their extinction equally thus shows their lack of adaptation).⁷⁹

Around the same time, the zoologist Jared Diamond conjectures in a similar vein to Foley that: "A zoologist from outer space would immediately classify us as just a third species of chimpanzee, along with the pygmy chimp of Zaire and the common chimp of the rest of tropical Africa".⁸⁰ As opposed to Foley, however, there is no doubt in Diamond's mind that the encounter between Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon led to the former's extinction and to the latter's "Great Leap Forward" – an event that was the first in a cynical series of "progress by genocide":

My guess is that events in Europe at the time of the Great Leap Forward were similar to events that have occurred repeatedly in the modern world, whenever a numerous people with more advanced technology invades the lands of a much less numerous people with less advanced technology ... By analogy, I guess that Cro-Magnon diseases, murders, and displacements did in the Neanderthals. If so, then the Cro-Magnon/Neanderthal transition was a harbinger of what was to come, when the victors' descendants began squabbling among themselves.⁸¹

The encounter would thus be the primal scene of colonialism and would constitute the trauma that forces the compulsive repetition of the cruelty of humans warring amongst themselves (with

⁷⁷ Foley, *Humans Before Humanity*, p. 104.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29. Foley's view of Neanderthals (and other hominids) as "missing links" between modern humans (as opposed to hominids) and a common ancestor no longer correspond to the latest scientific information, however, which shows Neanderthals to be a parallel species co-existing with modern humans for several ten thousands of years. What it nevertheless articulates is the fundamental ambiguity of 'descent' that the temporal dimension of 'before' expresses. The fascinating idea that a 'planet without apes' would enhance the impression of discontinuity, human exceptionalism and diminish the explanatory power of evolution is something I will further engage with below.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁸⁰ Jared Diamond, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee*, (London: Vintage, 1991), 2.

⁸¹ Diamond, pp. 44-45.

technology in all its forms, arguably, as driving force). One can here sense the proximity with Golding's view and his portrayal of Neanderthals in the aftermath of WWII.

The evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, in *The Human Story* (2004), also subscribes to the view that: "Were the Neanderthals or the later *Homo erectus* still alive – as the former were until around 28,000 years ago – the gap between humans and the other great apes might be less glaring."⁸² He describes the Neanderthal's extinction as "the final mystery": "suddenly within a short space of time, about 30,000 years ago, [the Neanderthals] simply faded out. The fact that this seems to have coincided with the arrival of anatomically modern humans (a group of people known as the Cro-Magnons) in Europe from Africa some 40,000 years ago has always seemed ... well, suspicious".⁸³ The suspicion of "the hoary spectre of racial extermination" and fratricide of our 'older brother' (as Dunbar states, "[t]he current view is that Neanderthals represent the descendants of an early migration out of Africa into Europe by archaic *H. sapiens*")⁸⁴ haunts human consciousness as much as it underpins the idea of human exceptionalism:

It is sobering to remember just how strange these times we live in actually are: the 28,000-year period since the Neanderthals died out is unique in the five-million year history of the human lineage in that there has only been one living species of hominid during it. Hitherto, there has probably been no time period when there have not been at least two (and sometimes as many as five) species of hominid wandering the byways of the world at the same time – bumping warily into each other from time to time. This fact has tended to exaggerate our apparent uniqueness and has perhaps been responsible for giving us a false sense of our own importance. Like all single children born late in their parents' lives, we humans have proved more than just a handful to our ageing relatives. We invariably assume that we deserve special attention.⁸⁵

One could argue that this misperception is an even more strange and dangerous one at the moment that we, on the one hand, increasingly, in the face of intensifying ecological extinction threats and under the banner of new, posthumanist and postanthropocentric world views, are writing ourselves out of the picture; and we, on the other hand, are engaging in transhumanist 'science fictional' fantasies of slipping out of our animal bodies, and are thus preparing the handing over to our 'successor' species, the robot, or 'artificial intelligence' more generally. The idea of technological determinism within human evolution thus comes full circle with our technologically induced (self-) extinction. In this context, *before* humanity all too easily (and hastily) gives rise to *after* humanity at a time when all the injunctions and implications of the 'before' (and the 'after', for that matter) are in danger of being violently repressed.

Even though, as Richard Dawkins suggests in *The Ancestor's Tale*, published in the same year as Dunbar's *The Human Story*, due to new genetic evidence extracted from Neanderthal bones "successful interbreeding between Neanderthals and Moderns was rare", the ambient haunting of the Neanderthal receives new genetic and biopolitical urgency. As Dawkins explains, "if only one Neanderthal male, say, bred into a sapiens population, that gave him a reasonable chance of being a common ancestor to all Europeans alive today. This can be true even if Europeans contain no Neanderthal genes at all. A striking thought."⁸⁶ More recently, due to new DNA analytical technology

⁸² Robin Dunbar, *The Human Story: A New History of Mankind's Evolution*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), 34.

⁸³ Dunbar, p. 35.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁸⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), 58.

– referred to as “the molecular clock” – the genetic relationship between Neanderthals and humans has become even more complex, as *The New Scientist* explained featuring an article on “Our Distant Origin – humans have been human for a lot longer than we thought”.⁸⁷ A 2013 special edition of *Scientific American* even credits “our inner Neanderthal” with up to four percent of our contemporary DNA – some of which might contain “disease-fighting genes”.⁸⁸ The other ‘forerunner’ function of the Neanderthals from a contemporary point of view includes their fatal experience with earlier forms of ‘climate change’ and living (or dying) in a ‘world in flux’: “So rapid were these oscillations [due to an increasingly unstable climate] that over the course of an individual’s lifetime, all the plants and animals that a person had grown up with could vanish and be replaced with unfamiliar flora and fauna. And then, just as quickly, the environment could change back again”.⁸⁹ As Kate Wong concludes:

The Stone Age whodunit is far from solved. But researchers are converging on one conclusion: regardless of whether climate or competition with moderns, or some combination thereof, was the prime mover in the decline of the Neanderthals, the precise factors governing the extinction of individual populations of these archaic hominids almost certainly varied from group to group. Some may have perished from disease, others from inbreeding. “Each valley may tell its own story.”⁹⁰

It thus seems that Golding’s *The Inheritors* might still be awaiting its serialization. The emerging contemporary consensus on the importance, proximity and ‘likeness’ of the Neanderthals stands in stark contrast to one of the most influential but also most sceptical voices regarding the role Neanderthals might have played in the last phase of our hominization: Ian Tattersall, former anthropology curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. His views will thus conclude my brief survey.

In 1995, Tattersall published a popular science book entitled *The Last Neanderthal*,⁹¹ in which he writes – in what could be read as a direct comment on Golding’s project in *The Inheritors* – that “envisioning exactly how beings who differed enormously in their cognitive capacities would have communicated and interacted is difficult. Perhaps it’s not too far-fetched to imagine that only the cleverest Neanderthals could have managed such contacts successfully and passed their newfound knowledge on to others.”⁹² The fact that “We were not alone”, as Tattersall’s introduction to the volume *The Last Human* states,⁹³ should not distract us from the qualitative leap that must have happened for Cro-Magnon to depose Neanderthal: “we find nothing in the technological record of the Neanderthals to suggest that they were symbolic thinkers. Skilful, yes; complex, certainly. But not in the way that we are.”⁹⁴ Once again, the view that Neanderthals were ‘lacking’ in symbolic thought – though highly contested – here forms the ultimate source of self-legitimation and human exceptionalism. In my view, it is this contested claim that constitutes the real battleground of

⁸⁷ Catherine Brahic, “Our true dawn”, *The New Scientist* 24 November 2012, pp. 34-37.

⁸⁸ Kate Wong, In *Scientific American*, special collection edition “What Makes Us Human?”, 22.1 (Winter 2013): 77-83. See also the slightly updated and expanded reissue under the title “The Story of Us – It’s Stranger Than Anyone Thought”, *Scientific American*, special collector’s edition, Fall 2019.

⁸⁹ Wong, p. 79.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁹¹ Ian Tattersall, *The Last Neanderthal: The Rise, Success, and Mysterious Extinction of Our Closest Human Relatives*, (New York: Nevreumont Publishing, 1995).

⁹² Tattersall, *The Last Neanderthal*, p. 202.

⁹³ Ian Tattersall, “Introduction: We were not alone”, *The Last Human: A Guide to Twenty-Two Species of Extinct Humans*, eds. G.J. Sawyer and Viktor Deak, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 18-23.

⁹⁴ Ian Tattersall, *Masters of the Planet: The Search for Our Human Origins*, (Hounds Mills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 177.

Golding's *The Inheritors* and explains the contradictory interpretations it has received. I will thus engage directly with question of the Neanderthals' cognitive and linguistic 'abilities'.

*Language, Cognition and 'Becoming Human'*⁹⁵

One of the most mysterious statements in Golding's *The Inheritors* concerns the Neanderthals' extraordinary communication 'technology': "Quite without warning, all the people shared a picture inside their heads".⁹⁶ The possibility of such a telepathic sharing raises the question of the Neanderthals' humanity even more urgently, i.e. whether they are 'less' or indeed 'more-than-human'. Cognitive ability and symbolic representation (language in the widest sense) have always been at the centre of this question, as Alan Mann states:

Modern humans have a range of abilities in cognition, symbolic representation, speech and language, manipulative skills, and social complexity that might be summed up as "humanness". In this sense, were the Neanderthals human, non-human, or in the process of becoming human?⁹⁷

Ian Tattersall provides us with a perfect example of the role language, cognition and 'symbolic cognitive processes' have played in the traditional paleoanthropological distinction between 'us' humans and 'them' (all the other homini non-sapiens, including the Neanderthals):

This new capacity [of symbolic thought]... stands in the starker possible contrast to the more modest achievements of the Neandertals whom the Cro-Magnons so rapidly displaced from their homeland in Europe and Western Asia. Indeed, Cro-Magnon behaviors – just like our own – evidently differed totally from those of any other kind of human that had ever previously existed. It is no denigration at all of the Neandertals and other now extinct human species – whose attainments were entirely admirable in their own ways – to say that with the arrival on Earth of symbol-centred, behaviourally modern *Homo sapiens*, an entirely new order of being had materialized on the scene. And explaining just how this extraordinary new phenomenon came about is at the same time both the most intriguing question and the most baffling one in all of biology ... And it was almost certainly the adoption of symbolic cognitive processes that gave our kind the final – and, for the Neandertals, fatal – edge.⁹⁸

This kind of damning the Neanderthal with faint praise in the end confirms the deadly capacity of symbolic thought which cost the Neanderthals dearly (and might ultimately bring about our own downfall, in turn and might cost the entire planet 'dearly'). It nevertheless serves at the same time as the ultimate legitimization of the (evolutionary-biological-paleoanthropological) scientific discourse and as the solution to this ultimate human 'mystery'.

Tattersall proposes to see the emergence of symbolic thought as an 'exaptation', by which he understands "characteristics that arise in one context before being exploited in another, or ... the

⁹⁵ For a discussion of the wider theoretical or philosophical context of this problematic see "Interlude 1: Languages and Evolutions", below.

⁹⁶ Golding, *The Inheritors*, p. 38.

⁹⁷ Alan Mann, "The Genus *Homo* and the Origins of 'Humanness'", *The Oxford Handbook of Language Evolution*, eds. Maggie Tallerman and Kathleen R. Gibson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 281.

⁹⁸ Ian Tattersall, "How We Came to Be Human – The acquisition of language and the capacity for symbolic art may lie at the very heart of the extraordinary cognitive abilities that set us apart from the rest of creation", *Scientific American*, special edition "Becoming Human – Evolution and the Rise of Intelligence", p. 68.

process by which such novelties are adopted in populations".⁹⁹ While the feature of symbolic thought might have been dormant so to speak in other or even all hominids, it is only with Cro-Magnon that it was "co-opted into some new function":

Unfortunately, exactly what it was that exapted the brain for modern cognitive purposes remains obscure. This is largely because, while we know a lot about brain structure and about which brain components are active during the performance of particular functions, we have no idea at all about how the brain converts a mass of electrical and chemical signals into what we are individually familiar with as consciousness and thought patterns. And it is this which it will be crucial to understand if we are ever to make the leap to comprehending exactly what it is that enables us to be (and I use the term advisedly) human.¹⁰⁰

Which means, it is probably safe to say, that the exaptation hypothesis is entirely conjectural or speculative. What Tattersall and many others seem to be very clear and adamant about, on the other hand, is that there is a fundamental difference or chasm between modern humans and Neanderthal (and other hominids) as far as their cognitive processes and language capacities are concerned – despite the absence of conclusive fossil or DNA evidence for these 'soft' (or, as one could also say, largely 'cultural') features or, indeed, their absence. Instead, as Tattersall claims, the general theoretical narrative proposes that "at some point, say around 70 or 60 kyr ago, a cultural innovation occurred in one human population or another that activated a potential for symbolic cognitive processes that had resided in the human brain all along, we can readily explain the rapid spread of symbolic behaviors by a simple mechanism of cultural diffusion", which leaves a lot of room for speculation as to "what the new cultural stimulus might have been".¹⁰¹ It also implies that it is even more 'unfortunate' for the Neanderthals that it had not been them to which this stimulus had applied itself – and which, in turn, makes Golding's scenario, in which both species clearly have access to cognitive symbolic processes, albeit very different ones, even more radically speculative but also quite innovative. The crux lies not in the mere ability to engage in symbolic cognitive processes but in the recombination, availability and externalization of mental symbols, or symbolic creativity like art, writing, technological innovation and 'science'¹⁰² – the absence of which ultimately disqualifies the Neanderthals merely due to a lack of (material, archival) evidence.

Thus, while Neanderthals spoke "in some general sense... what they almost certainly did not possess, however, [was] language as we are familiar with", Tattersall concludes.¹⁰³ And since language is the "ultimate symbolic mental function... it is virtually impossible to conceive of thought as we know it in its absence",¹⁰⁴ which means that the stimulus that changed everything in leading to the 'emergence' of symbolic thought, for Tattersall, must have been "the invention of language".¹⁰⁵ The fact that Neanderthals had a more 'ape-like', higher-positioned larynx which would not have allowed them to pronounce the full range of modern human sounds was usually taken as evidence that though Neanderthals might have had some form of (proto)language¹⁰⁶ their phonetic use and range of

⁹⁹ Tattersall, "How We Came to Be Human", p. 67.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁰² Or, what Bernard Stiegler, following Foucault, refers to as 'hypomnemata', or the 'exteriorization' and 'technicization' of memory; cf. Stiegler, "Memory", In *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, eds. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 64-87.

¹⁰³ Tattersall, "How We Came to Be Human", p. 71.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁶ On the idea of the passage from protolanguage to language see Derek Bickerton's *Language and Species*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). Bickerton, however, in the end seems to admit defeat as far as the exact

linguistic signs (i.e. speech)¹⁰⁷ would have been ‘anatomically’ restricted.¹⁰⁸ Complex mental processes relying on language obviously have an influence on cognitive ability including higher consciousness and consciousness of self. They include some form of ‘theory of mind’ or ‘mind-reading’ capacity (double-guessing and anticipating the thoughts and intentions of others – human and nonhuman), which, in turn, is required for the development of complex social relationships.¹⁰⁹

One of the most original attempts to arrive at an explanation of the origin-of-human-language mystery through a combination of scientific, ‘poetic’ or rhetorical and ‘imaginary’ or speculative approaches is Christopher Collins’s *Paleopoetics*.¹¹⁰ Since there are some similarities between the notion of ‘paleopoetics’ and what I have been putting forward under the idea of *before humanity* I will discuss Collins’s model in more detail. This will also allow me to return to Golding – who, however, has never been very far from my round-up of recent paleoanthropological positions. In many ways, Collins’s approach complements the idea of ‘prehistoric fiction’ of which Golding’s *The Inheritors* is a primary example. Collins, however, is not concerned with representations of prehistoric humans *per se* but seeks to combine paleo-science with rhetoric to investigate “the prehistoric origins of literature”.¹¹¹ He extends cognitive psychology and cognitive poetics into the speculative realm of the paleontological, with a special focus on theories about the origins of language and pre- or proto-literate ‘poetry’. As Collins cautions, however: “if the object of our search is prehistoric *poiesis* and the cognitive skills that must have made it possible, we must at the outset lay aside our literate conception of poetry as lines of words printed on white paper rectangles”.¹¹² In fact, one could say – and this is the interesting parallel between Collins and my approach here – paleopoetics is the ‘science’ that is equivalent to Golding’s speculative (or imaginary, fictional)

transition from proto- to (full) language ability is concerned by stating that “any ‘intermediate stage’ hypothesis should fall under Occam’s razor” (p. 172).

¹⁰⁷ This is for example the conclusion that Marizio Gentilucci and Michael Corballis draw in their essay, “The Hominid That Talked”, In *What Makes Us Human?* Ed. Charles Pasternak, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 63.

¹⁰⁸ This view goes back to a debate triggered by the cognitive linguist Philip Lieberman in the 1970s. A more recent ‘reprise’ by Lieberman can be found in “Current views on Neanderthal speech capabilities: A reply to Boe et al. (2002)”, *Journal of Phonetics* 35 (2007): 552-63. See also the reply by Boe et al. in the same issue, pp. 564-81. The question of the Neanderthals’ speech capacity (or lack thereof) is highly contested regardless of whether it is based on fossil finds (see Donald Johanson and Blake Edgar, *From Lucy to Language*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 106) or genetic evidence (i.e. the presence of the FOXP2 ‘speech gene’ in Neanderthal DNA). The ‘Great Leap Forward’ model as such is equally contested, see for example John V. Canfield, *Becoming Human: The Development of Language, Self, and Self-Consciousness*, (Houndsills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); esp. chapter 5 (“How the Human Got Its Words”), 58-77. In sum, Steven Pinker’s early quib at Lieberman, largely to underscore his own theory of a human ‘language instinct’, is still a good heuristic device to explain the remaining uncertainty over the issue: “In any case, e lengege weth e smell nember of vowels cen remeen quete expresseve, so we cannot conclude that a hominid with a restricted vowel space had little language”. Cf. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994), 354. Gary Tomlinson makes a similar argument regarding ‘musicking’ by Neanderthals: “Neandertals did not sing as modern humans do, and they did not speak a modern language; but their fashioning of the material world preserves traces of powerful cognitive patterns at once protomusical and protolinguistic” (Tomlinson, *A Million Years of Music: The Emergence of Human Modernity*, (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 172). More recent research, however, seems to confirm more and more that “Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens* had similar auditory and speech capacities”, cf. Mercedes Conde-Valverde et al., *Nature Ecology and Evolution* 5 (2021): 609–615.

¹⁰⁹ For a good and brief summary see Robin Dunbar, “On the origin of the human mind”, *Evolution and the Human Mind: Modularity, Language and Meta-Cognition*, eds. Petr Carruthers and Andrew Chamberlain, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 238-53.

¹¹⁰ Christopher Collins, *Paleopoetics: The Evolution of the Preliterate Imagination*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

¹¹¹ Collins, *Paleopoetics*, p. ix.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

attempt to provide his readers with an inside view of the Neanderthals' 'symbolic processes of cognition'. Important premises for Collins are the idea that "the brain is an embodiment of its own evolutionary narrative", and that "poetry is the brain's use of language to recover knowledge that is at once deeply past and deeply present".¹¹³ This presence of the evolutionary past is contained in rhetoric – which, according to Collins, has a pre- and nonhuman dimension – an aspect which resonates with the specific idea of ancestry here under discussion:

Communicating social and object information in ways that convinced others of one's knowledge and trustworthiness became the valuable skill we understand as *rhetoric*. Rhetoric ... serves purposes that predate language and, in fact predate the emergence of our human genus, purposes that include territorial dominance, sexual selection, alliance building, and all those other social negotiations practiced by our primate ancestors. This rhetoric would have been one of postural, gestural, and vocal signs.¹¹⁴

Collins thus describes the development of what he refers to as "the presymbolic mind", or the "cognitive skills essential to verbal art and trace[s] their gradual emergence over the long prehistory of our species".¹¹⁵ It speaks for the power of literature, understood as 'imaginative writing', that it is able to thematise, to explore and, in a sense, to produce, as in Golding's main character, Lok, and the other fictional Neanderthals, the kind of 'presymbolic mind' that stands outside and prior to its own existence (in this sense, it certainly shares some of the intuitions of ancestry Meillassoux was missing in philosophy). One could thus argue that *The Inheritors* is literature in the meta-literary sense: it fictionalises and depicts its own 'paleopoetic' origins.

Golding's project is to allow modern humans to 'inhabit' a Neanderthal *Umwelt* based on *empathy* and 'mind-sharing', in the form of the recognition that "others share with us a common [but also different] set of needs and desires" based on visual perception.¹¹⁶ What distinguishes Collins's evolutionary account from Golding's scheme is that the former focuses on the developmental rather than the conflictual aspect of symbolic world-formation and cognition, i.e. the fictional and real encounter between Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon. Collins, in fact and in my view problematically, subscribes to the 'classic' view that "[e]ven if an older species, such as the Neanderthals, had vocal language, they could never have communicated among themselves at the speed, not to mention the semantic and syntactical precision, of *Homo sapiens sapiens*".¹¹⁷ Collins, in this context, differentiates between 'pre-language' (which includes manual gestures and sounds used by apes) and 'proto-language' ("the symbolic code of syntax-less speech composed of clearly articulated phonemes that many assume had to have been a transitional phase between pre-language and full language"¹¹⁸). The special power of literature (and, even more specifically, poetry), nevertheless lies in what Collins refers to as 'paralanguage' (i.e. "retained features of the prelinguistic system, deploying that older repertoire of voice and gesture ... to convey a broad range of affective states and semantic nuances"¹¹⁹). Imaginative writing like Golding's – which applies its own 'deep-time' powers to an imaginary (i.e. speculative) explanation of how these powers first developed – is thus "a living link to our phylogenetic past ... [and] derives its special properties from its power to actualize those older, deeper cognitive levels that still remain within us".¹²⁰ Fiction, if one follows Collins's argument to its

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

logical conclusion, is thus always in a sense ‘prehistoric fiction’, just that in Golding’s case it is prehistoric fiction that thematises its own prehistorical roots; in short, it is ‘metaprehistoric fiction’.¹²¹

On the back of this brief outline of the presumed cognitive and linguistic differences between humans and Neanderthals I now propose to have a closer look at Golding’s text and the specific symbolic cognitive processes and language used by the Neanderthal characters in his novel and how they are reflected in criticism. There are a number of features pointed out by both literary critical as well as more specifically linguistic interpretations of *The Inheritors*. In fact, the novel even plays an interesting role within the history of linguistics itself, namely in the discussion about the importance of ‘stylistics’. In 1971, Michael Halliday used *The Inheritors* to promote stylistics as a new approach to reading literature through linguistics.¹²² Halliday’s main claim is that the novel “provides a remarkable illustration of how grammar can convey levels of meaning in literature”.¹²³ According to him, “Golding is offering a ‘particular way of looking at experience’, a vision of things which he ascribes to Neanderthal man; and he conveys this by syntactic prominence, by the frequency with which he selects certain key syntactic options”.¹²⁴ These syntactic patterns, as Halliday goes on to analyse, constitute what he refers to as “syntactic imagery”, which in the language use attributed by Golding to the Neanderthal group is marked by a “lack of transitive clauses of action with human subjects”.¹²⁵ Stanley Fish, in *Is There a Text in This Class?*, takes issue with the assumption that “syntactic preferences correlate with habits of meaning”. Instead of stylistics and grammar Fish wishes to emphasise the role of the reader in interpretation. He criticizes Halliday for what he calls his “Darwinian reading” of Golding in which – like most interpreters focusing on the novel from a linguistic point of view – he follows the paleoanthropological dynamic of ‘deficiency’. The result is, as Fish claims, that:

[n]ot only does Halliday go directly from formal categories to interpretation, but he goes to an interpretation which proclaims the superiority of his formal categories. The survival of the fittest tribe is coincidental with a step toward the emergence of the fittest grammar.¹²⁶

Instead, Fish wishes to promote his own brand of reader-response criticism as a better way of reading literature, since it starts from the assumption that the central meaning-making instance is not grammatical or syntactical functions (“as if meanings arose independently of human transaction”)¹²⁷ but readers and their ‘interpretive communities’. Consequently, Fish can frame his attack on Halliday and stylistics in general as a defence of ‘humanism’ against “the desire to be relieved of the burden of interpretation by handing it over to an algorithm, and the fear of being left

¹²¹ Interesting parallels and differences are arising with Linda Hutcheon’s characterization of postmodernist literature as ‘historiographic metafiction’, which, unfortunately I cannot pursue further here; cf. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, (New York: Routledge, 1988).

¹²² M. A. K. Halliday, “Linguistic Function and Literary Style: An Inquiry into the Language if William Golding’s *The Inheritors*”, *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. Seymour Chatman, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 330-68.

¹²³ Halliday, p. 347.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

¹²⁶ Stanley Fish, “What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such terrible Things About It?”, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 83. As a consequence, the “lack of transitivity is *read* as a lack of agency because it appears in a book whose central characters are primitive humans”, as David Hoover explains (cf. David L. Hoover, *Language and Style in The Inheritors*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999), 22). Hoover goes on to provide some important qualifications to both Halliday’s and Fish’s claims as far as the ‘transitivity’ or the apparent ‘lack’ thereof in Lok’s and Fa’s language use in the novel is concerned.

¹²⁷ Fish, p. 84.

alone with the self-renewing and unquantifiable power of human signifying".¹²⁸ Curiously, Fish does not object to Halliday's attempt to characterize the stylistic features used by Golding to create a Neanderthal language as such, but instead he wants to divert the focus on the importance of 'affect' (and hence on the role of the reader) in stylistics: "when Halliday demonstrates that in the language of the 'people' in Golding's *The Inheritors*, agency is given not to human but to inanimate subjects ('the stick grew shorter at both ends'), we can extrapolate from his evidence to the interpretive effort demanded of the reader who must negotiate it".¹²⁹ The fundamental difference, according to Fish, lies in "regarding human beings as passive and disinterested comprehenders of a knowledge external to them (that is, of an *objective* knowledge)" and "regarding human beings as at every moment creating the experiential spaces into which a personal knowledge flows".¹³⁰ Fish's claim is important for our context in that it allows us to by-pass the evaluative approach towards Neanderthal language based on an anthropocentric model of 'deficiency'. I also believe that a non-normative approach, in this sense, which does not see a Neanderthal 'pre-symbolic' mind and 'language' as necessarily inferior, is closer to what Golding wanted to achieve in *The Inheritors* – namely a revision of Wells's 'ogre' image of prehistoric humans and a less triumphalist evaluation of human achievements, i.e. language and culture in particular.¹³¹

The debate between Halliday and Fish has received a number of commentaries with a view to refining Golding's 'Neanderthal style'. Apart from 'misattributing' agency to nonhuman subjects (an aspect I will return to below in my discussion of animism), another 'deficiency' at work in Neanderthal language, at least as described and used by Golding's narrator, is "underlexicalisation [Roger Fowler's term]: the use of a restricted vocabulary and the avoidance of terms outside the experience and linguistic resources of the people" (e.g. "stick" for "bow", "twig" for "arrow", "log" for "fallen tree" etc.).¹³² A good recent summary of the linguistic argument surrounding *The Inheritors* is given by Billy Clark, who, from his own 'pragmatist' standpoint, focuses on "the inferential processes of readers" Golding's fictive linguistic representation of Neanderthal minds plays with or "manipulates".¹³³ Clark explains that: "a key aspect of the contrast between the two groups and our understanding of the story is based on the different kinds of inferential processes we go through when reading different parts of the book".¹³⁴ It is the contrast between what Halliday designated as "Language A" (the language of the narrator's account of the first ten chapters of the

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86. It is striking to what extent this exchange from the 1970s and 1980s prefigures the current debate around the use and methodology of the emerging 'digital humanities' and the role of empiricism and linguistics within an arguably still predominantly hermeneutic paradigm of literary (and cultural) criticism.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹³¹ This does not mean, however, that we should follow Fish in his celebration of the "impossible enterprise of understanding understanding" and the humanist-exceptionalist conclusion that "meaning is human" (p. 96). On the contrary, what an analysis of the language of Golding's Neanderthals will hopefully show is that (human and nonhuman) meaning is produced through an interaction with a human-nonhuman environment which does not allow for a straightforward attribution of agency (transitivity of intransitivity) and circumvents the usual 'ablism' that is prevalent in paleoanthropological explanations of hominization. Fish hints at the possibility of such a more ecological and maybe even posthumanist reading when he points out that "[g]iven the evidence... the way seems equally open to an Edenic rather than a Darwinian reading of the novel, a reading in which the language of the 'people' reflects (or embodies or enshrines) a lost harmony between man and an animate nature. The triumph of the 'new people' would then be a disaster, the beginning of the end, of a decline into the taxonomic aridity of a mechanistic universe" (p. 82).

¹³² Cf. Elizabeth Black, "Metaphor, simile and cognition in Golding's *The Inheritors*", *Language and Literature* 2.1 (1993): 41.

¹³³ Billy Clark, "Salient Inferences: Pragmatics and *The Inheritors*", *Language and Literature* 18.2 (2009): 173-202.

¹³⁴ Clark, p. 187.

novel) and “Language B” (used in the final part told from Tuami’s Cro-Magnon or ‘modern’ human perspective) that produces the “inferential challenge” to the reader. The linguistic alienation effects used by Golding in Language A are listed by Clark as follows:

- short, simple sentences, mainly in simple past tense
- body parts and inanimate objects as agents, and as subjects of mental process and perception verbs, and intransitive verbs of motion
- body parts and inanimate objects with attributes normally associated with animate beings
- a small, concentrated, peculiarly distributed vocabulary of short words
- a high proportion of very frequent concrete, physical nouns and verbs
- natural object words used to refer to artifacts, buildings, and boats
- words referring to modern cultural phenomena and activities and names of known places and people are absent.¹³⁵

As such, these characteristics do not necessarily display any deficiency unless they are mapped onto ‘cognitive’ patterns. De Paolo’s reading of *The Inheritors* is an example of this strategy:

Directly correlating neuroanatomy to intelligence, Golding imagines a brain dysfunction for his Neanderthal population ... Golding emphasizes the perceptual experience of Lok (textually mediated through a third-person narrator) from the inside out ... The most characteristic aspect of Lok’s consciousness, and one incommensurate with the cultural and technological achievements of the Neanderthal, is ... an interruption of nerve-impulse *transduction* to the brain. Lok, it seems, is unable to process what he senses ... But beyond the *perceptual* level, Lok’s thinking cannot progress: what the early modern humans are doing and how it affects the lost children is incomprehensible to him. Because his interpretative skills are stunted ...¹³⁶

De Paolo’s aim is to show Golding’s flawed ‘unscientific’ and ‘conservative’ misrepresentation of the Neanderthal as having a ‘fragmented mind’ by denying the accuracy of the ‘brain dysfunction’ Golding ‘inflicted’ on his characters. However, it is also possible to just see de Paolo’s reaction as a case of over-interpretation. In a sense, just like Halliday’s functional stylistic analysis of the novel, De Paolo’s over-insistence on scientific accuracy downplays the ‘human’ interpretive aspect. The fact that Lok’s thoughts cannot be ‘trusted’ does not necessarily have to be mapped onto any kind of (cognitive or cultural) deficiency, “sensory overload” or “cognitive deprivation”.¹³⁷ It merely points to the possibility of an ‘other’ thinking, or a thinking of the ‘other’, and has more to do with the cognitive conundrum that ‘we’ humans usually experience when we are confronted with the possibility and the inscrutability of other minds.¹³⁸ It reveals thus just as much about our own cognitive deficiencies as those apparent in any ‘deviant’ theories of mind, whether human, nonhuman or prehuman.

Most interpretations of *The Inheritors*, however, feel somehow compelled to see Lok’s confrontation and fascination with the ‘new people’ as a process of cognitive adaptation or some pedagogical assimilation with all its ambivalent outcomes (although the ambivalence is usually projected from a specific human and quite romantic perspective onto the Neanderthals in the sense of the latter having lost their ‘innocence’ due to that encounter). Two examples may suffice here: Elizabeth Beck ends her investigation of the use of simile, metaphor and underlexicalization in the novel, as well as

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹³⁶ De Paolo, *Human Prehistory in Fiction*, p. 75

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹³⁸ This is another reminder of the ‘other minds’ problem, as outlined in Thomas Nagel’s influential essay “What is it like to be bat?”; see above.

Lok's "acquisition of *like* as a tool", by seeing the 'enhancement' of the Neanderthals' 'capacity of thinking' as a double-edged sword:

With the acquisition of like as a tool, the people's capacity for thinking is enhanced. But this brings with it the potential for change, allowing them to become agents instead of passively relying on [the goddess] Oa. So the potential for evil is introduced into their world. It is not meeting the new people which destroys the people: they carry the seeds of change within themselves. Change is essential for survival, though the price is loss of innocence ... This language and action together reflect the theme of the novel: the price of the highest achievements of mankind is his potential for evil.¹³⁹

Again, it could be argued that Beck's well-intentioned post-Darwinian reading of the encounter between Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons elides the fact that it is a (modern) human reader who is likely to project his or her own ambiguous feelings of good and evil, innocence and guilt onto Lok as a proto-human or the human 'other' to explain his or her own status as 'survivor' after the effect in the form of a reverse teleology. Similarly, Ruddick claims that "[i]n William Golding's *The Inheritors* the encounter between transitional speech and articulate language is raised into a major tragic theme",¹⁴⁰ the 'tragedy' being that humanity's "marvellous linguistic capacity has turned us into a species capable of liquidating even our closest relatives or neighbors as though they were deadly enemies".¹⁴¹

To avoid the normative (humanist) conceptual framework these readings presuppose and reconfirm, I would like to align my own reading of Golding's *The Inheritors* with more recent and also more non-normative approaches to the question of *the other human* and *before humanity*, like for example Thomas Wynn and Frederick Coolidge's *How to Think Like a Neanderthal*.¹⁴² Wynn and Coolidge gather insights from all available scientific data and approaches to deduce and reconstruct a cognitive portrait of likely Neanderthal personality traits, like for example "tenacity; or dogged persistence, wariness especially with regard to strangers; strong emotional attachment" – characteristics that "attest to our common humanity".¹⁴³ They also present evidence for Neanderthal semantic and procedural memory, theory of mind, symbolic culture (e.g. burial rituals) and speech. What is 'missing' in Neanderthal culture (at least there is little evidence for it) is technological innovation, representational or symbolic art and complex knowledge of social interaction (e.g. "cheater detection"),¹⁴⁴ which leads Winn and Coolidge to construct the following typical Neanderthal 'personality profile': "pragmatic, including callous when necessary; stoic; tolerant of risk; sympathetic and empathetic; neophobic; unimaginative; dogmatic and inflexible; xenophobic; direct but laconic".¹⁴⁵ Regardless of the intrinsic value of such an exercise, it is probably fair to say that each and every one has encountered modern *humans* who closely fit this profile. Wynn and Coolidge therefore conclude that "a Neanderthal baby raised in a modern human household would grow into a fully functional human adult. His genetic cognitive endowment would be rather different from average, and this would tend to channel him in particular developmental directions, but he could acquire all of the necessary abilities for modern life".¹⁴⁶ We can thus presume that Fa's and Lok's

¹³⁹ Beck, "Metaphor, simile and cognition...", p. 47.

¹⁴⁰ Ruddick, *The Fire in the Stone*, p. 178.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁴² Thomas Wynn and Frederick L. Coolidge, *How to Think Like a Neanderthal*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁴³ Wynn and Coolidge, p. 20.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-98.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

child – the only survivor of the encounter with the ‘new people’, who, in fact, adopt him – has a good chance of growing into his new community and maybe even passing on his genetic material to us.¹⁴⁷ Most interesting, however, because of its similarity with Golding’s fictionalization (although there is no evidence of any direct influence), is Wynn and Coolidge’s speculative version of the encounter of Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon that leads to the former’s demise:

This story of modern humans is often presented as a tale of evolutionary success, of the triumph of brains over brawn. Here we would like to present it as a sad tale of cultural incompatibility and evolutionary doom.¹⁴⁸

The ‘cultural encounter’ is thus not that different from more recent fateful encounters between ‘incompatible’ cultures, or indeed from contemporary theories about ‘clashes of civilization’ in the age of globalization, cultural imperialism and loss of cultural diversity. The description of the encounter with the ‘fearsome others’ from the perspective of the Neanderthals provided by Wynn and Coolidge very much resemble Lok’s own experience as portrayed in *The Inheritors*:

The foreigners, whom we will dub Cro-Magnons, had a very strange appearance. They were tall, several inches taller than the tallest Neanderthal man. They had dark skin and dark hair, very unlike the light hair and eyes of Neanderthals. They covered themselves head to toe in tight-fitting, tailored clothes. When they removed their clothes their bodies were thin and poorly muscled ... But their heads were oddest of all. They had bulbous heads with very small, child-like faces, small noses, and ugly protruding chins.¹⁴⁹

Wynn and Coolidge ultimately come to the same conclusion as the reader of Golding’s *The Inheritors* might do, namely that the ultimate fate of the Neanderthals is “to live on as inexact mirrors of ourselves”.¹⁵⁰

*Animism and Empathy*¹⁵¹

It is a widely held belief that it is our ability to put ourselves in another person’s shoes and read their mind, so to speak, what makes us human. If empathy (towards fellow humans) is what distinguishes us from nonhumans, what does empathy towards nonhumans make us? The minds of our fellow humans ultimately, however, remain as inaccessible to us as the minds of nonhuman others (assuming that they do have ‘minds’, of course). Thomas Nagel, famously, explained the extent of the philosophical problem of the unbridgeable gap to know ‘other minds’ in the following words:

I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be bat ... The fact that we cannot expect ever to accommodate in our language a detailed description of Martian or bat phenomenology should not lead us to dismiss as meaningless the claim that bats and Martians have experiences fully comparable in richness of detail to our own.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Golding’s ‘visionary’ in- or foresight here converges with current scientific knowledge of the continued presence of Neanderthal genetic information in modern humans.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 184–185.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁵¹ For a more general discussion of animism see also “Interlude 2: Animism without Humans, or Belief without Belief”, below. For more on empathy see also chapter 4.

¹⁵² Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”, in *Mortal Questions*, pp. 169, 170. Dorothy L. Cheney and Robert M. Seyfarth extend Nagel’s argument on ‘other minds’ to monkeys in *How Monkeys See the World: Inside the Mind of Another Species*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Their conclusion as to whether

A key aspect of linking Golding, Neanderthal thinking and the kind of proto-posthumanism contained in the phrase *before humanity* passes through the questions of animism and empathy. Animism or animistic beliefs are probably the linguistic and cultural markers that are most closely associated with what constitutes the Neanderthal perspective as more ‘primitive’ as that of the Cro-Magnons. David Hoover begins his analysis, *Language and Style in The Inheritors*, accordingly:

When we learn that “The log has gone away”,¹⁵³ the animism that this sentence suggests reinforces the sentience of Lok’s feet. More hints of animism quickly follow it:

The water was not awake like the river or the fall but asleep, spreading there to the river and waking-up ... Fa! The log has gone away. I did not move the log to make people laugh. It has gone.¹⁵⁴

Perhaps in other contexts these would be simple personifications, but in a novel about primitive man they seem more or other than that: they suggest a world in which everything is alive.¹⁵⁵

Other features in Neanderthal cognitive behaviour like the ‘telepathic’ sharing of ‘pictures’ further reinforce the impression of ‘magic’ and create what Hoover calls an “animistic mind style”.¹⁵⁶ The reader of Golding’s novel is thus presented with an animistic understanding of the world in the first ten chapters, narrated by a third-person narrator who slips in and out of Lok’s perspective. The effect is that “we see events and objects of the fictional world through a primitive consciousness in a way that simultaneously allows us to understand them as normal and see that the Neanderthal understanding is quite different”.¹⁵⁷ Hoover goes on to dedicate an entire chapter to the question of “Transitivity, Agency, and Animism”, in which he supplements Halliday’s findings about “the frequent use of body parts and inanimate objects as subjects of transitive verbs” with a less normative view that claims that “these unusual subjects are more reasonably interpreted as an aspect of the animism of the world of the Neanderthals than as a sign of their inferiority or inadequacy”. In fact, it is the new people who might be said to have lost an important ability to communicate ‘telepathically’. This suggests that “the animism of the body parts of the Neanderthals should not be seen as demonstrating inferiority”.¹⁵⁸ As Hoover’s explains:

Golding makes effective use of agentive body parts, body parts as subjects of verbs of mental process or perception, and body parts as subjects of intransitive verbs in creating his animistic,

monkeys have a ‘theory of mind’ could also function word-for-word as an intervention placed within the context of the encounter between Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons in Golding’s *The Inheritors*:

In sum, many fundamental differences in social behaviour between human and nonhuman primates depend on the presence, or lack, of a *theory of mind*: whether individuals can recognize their own knowledge and attribute mental states to others. Apparently, monkeys see the world as composed of things that act, not things that think and feel. Although they are acutely sensitive to other animals’ behaviour, they know little about the knowledge or motives that causes animals to do what they do. In a monkey’s world, the knowledge possessed by an individual exists in a kind of vacuum: the individual does not know what he knows and cannot recognize knowledge (or lack of it) in others. (p. 308)

The parallels with Lok’s apparent ‘limitations’ and his ‘animism’ could not be more obvious. I will discuss the implications of the ape-human analogy in more detail in “Interlude 3: Ape/Man”, below.

¹⁵³ Golding, *The Inheritors*, p. 12.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Hoover, *Language and Style in The Inheritors*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁶ Hoover, p. 9.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

alien, and primitive fictional world. Although such body parts sometimes suggest that no conscious control is being exerted where we might expect it, they also suggest extraordinary abilities for the Neanderthals and a kind of distributed sentience in which body parts have their own kinds of knowledge and will.¹⁵⁹

If ‘animistic’ and ‘alien worlds’, ‘extraordinary abilities’ and ‘distributed sentience’ sound a little like science fiction – which returns us to the difficult generic classification of prehistoric fiction I started with – they also resonate with current ecological and posthumanist or postanthropocentric thinking. Graham Harvey, for example, refers to what he calls the ‘new animism’ in the following terms:

Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others. Animism is lived out in various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards and among other persons.¹⁶⁰

The reverse, i.e. positive, side of ‘primitiveness’ is usually some form of ‘authenticity’ and, as is also the case in Golding’s Neanderthals, this is likely to involve attributions of innocence and closeness to nature, in contrast to the ‘alienating’ effects of ‘modern life’ (a view that, in turn, is normally based on a more or less instrumental notion of technology and technological ‘progress’). Ironically, then, in the context of the current interest in the ‘nonhuman’, ‘object ontology’, ‘new vitalism’, or a rethinking of ‘materialism’ and a revision of the nature/culture divide, it might be Golding’s Neanderthals who are closer to present-day ‘moderns’ after the so-called ‘nonhuman turn’.¹⁶¹

Jane Bennett’s work, which is often associated with a (re)turn to materialism, for example, speaks of a renewed “enchantment as a weak ontology”¹⁶² and of “vibrant matter”.¹⁶³ What this approach shares with animism is the focus on the “active role of *nonhuman* materials in public life” and the insight that “we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world”, which might “generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, and will enable wiser interventions into that ecology”.¹⁶⁴ Consequently, Bennett also reclaims a form of “new primitivism” when she discusses the conceptual framework that might be necessary to achieve the “vibrant materialism” she advocates and which requires developing a renewed capacity for “naiveté”. One tactic, she writes, “might be to revisit and become temporarily infected by discredited philosophies of nature, risking ‘the taint of superstition, animism, vitalism, anthropomorphism, and other premodern attitudes’”.¹⁶⁵ As strategic, projected, speculative (or, indeed, all of these together) as Bennett’s list may look, I would argue there is no better way to characterise the beliefs of Golding’s Neanderthals, who, like us, ‘late humans’, are uncomfortably situated *before humanity*.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁶⁰ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), xi.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). As Steven Shaviro, writes, in *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014): “Panpsychism seems especially relevant today, in the light of the ‘nonhuman turn’ in critical discourse and the growth of speculative realism” (p. 86). See also Shaviro’s contribution to Grusin’s *The Nonhuman Turn*, “Consequences of Panpsychism”, pp. 19-44.

¹⁶² Cf. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 160ff.

¹⁶³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁶⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18; Bennett’s quote is from W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 149.

A good overview of the contemporary return to animism and its associated belief in ‘panpsychism’ can be found in David Skrbina’s collection *The Mind Abides*.¹⁶⁶ Particularly interesting in this respect and for our purposes are also Ian Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenology* and Steven Shaviro’s *The Universe of Things*.¹⁶⁷ Both volumes are informed by Meillassoux’s notion of ‘ancestrality’ and take a ‘speculative realist’ and ‘anti-correlationist’ stance.¹⁶⁸ Bogost in particular relates his project of a speculative phenomenology from the point of view of an ‘alien’ to the “abandonment of anthropocentric narrative coherence in favour of worldly detail”.¹⁶⁹ He approvingly cites Graham Harman who writes: “For we ourselves, just like Neanderthals, sparrows, mushrooms, and dirt, have never done anything else than act amidst the bustle of other actants”.¹⁷⁰ Like Bennett’s ‘enchantment’, Bogost’s alien phenomenology banks on the alienation effects that arise from a repositioning of the apparently familiar – in his word, “wonder”: “The posture one takes before the alien is that of curiosity, of wonder”.¹⁷¹ And, as I would like to add, this posture is also one that presupposes a more generous form of ‘empathy’.¹⁷² Wonder and (re)enchantment of the world mean that empathy is no longer ‘human-centred’. It also does away with the idea that empathy must be in any way morally ‘redeeming’ in a humanist sense.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁶ David Skrbina, ed., *The Mind Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2009). The volume contains, among many others, interventions by Graham Harman and Iain Hamilton Grant, both associated with speculative realism or object-oriented-ontology. See also Thomas Nagel’s excellent essay on panpsychism in his *Mortal Questions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 181-95; as well as John Protevi, *Life, War, Earth: Deleuze and the Sciences*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Protevi discusses panpsychism in relation to Deleuze’s notions of ‘larval subjects’ and ‘spatiotemporal dynamisms’ to illuminate one of the main problems that both speculative realists and critical posthumanists have been addressing, namely the question of the ‘before’, or how to explain ‘emergence’ (e.g. of the human). As Protevi writes: “Is there a point of emergence we can locate? That’s what panpsychists deny. For them, it is mind all the way down” (p. 195). “Mind all the way down” is indeed an excellent way of describing a non-normative and non-ablism conceptual framework for a different kind of paleoanthropology without any need for an anthropocentric reverse teleology to legitimate it.

¹⁶⁷ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s like to be a Thing*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) – both published in Cary Wolfe’s ground-breaking *Posthumanities* series.

¹⁶⁸ For a more detailed discussion of speculative realism’s notion of ‘ancestrality’ and critical posthumanism’s *before humanity* allow me to refer back to the “Preamble” and “Introduction: Before ...”, above.

¹⁶⁹ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, p. 41-42. This is realised by the alien phenomenologist in a practice that Bogost, following Bruno Latour, calls ‘ontography’. The parallels between these ideas and Golding’s ‘alien mind style’ applied to his Neanderthals, in my view, is evident.

¹⁷⁰ Bogost, p. 39, citing Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, (Melbourne: re:press, 2009), 58.

¹⁷¹ Bogost, p. 133.

¹⁷² This only seemingly goes against Thomas Nagel’s take on ‘Martian’ or ‘bat phenomenology’, cited above. Nagel would like us to work towards an “objective phenomenology *not* dependent on empathy or the imagination” and to “approach the gap between subjective and objective from *another direction*” by a “more objective understanding of the mental in its own right” (Nagel, p. 178, my emphasis). The kind of ‘speculation’ that speculative realism proposes, however, has very little to do with what Nagel refers to as ‘imagination’, while the kind of minimal empathy I suggest as necessary and always already at work in even the most panpsychic or animistic perspective, even including object-oriented-ontology, is not necessarily clearly attributable to either a subject or an object, nor to human or nonhuman forms of agency. In that sense, this primary form of empathy is posthumanist or postanthropocentric. It ‘happens’ *before* (and outside of) the human.

¹⁷³ Empathy also plays an important role in the study of nonhuman primates of course; see Kirstin Andrews and Lori Gruen, “Empathy in Other Apes”, In *Empathy and Morality*, ed. Heidi L. Maibom, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 193-209. As Andrews and Gruen explain in their conclusion:

Golding's *The Inheritors* is without doubt a novel that foregrounds this kind of empathy on various levels. And the entire paleoanthropological question that is raised by the scenario of the encounter between the Neanderthals and the Cro-Magnons – whether fictive or factual – could be reframed as a *crisis* of empathy, or as posing the question: what is (or was) empathy *before* humanity? Golding's strategy of shifting perspectives between Neanderthals and modern human ancestors only really makes sense if one also foregrounds the aspect of reader empathy (as a minimal form of reader response). In the context of my reading of *The Inheritors*, and in the light of the 'nonhuman turn', this empathic reaction corresponds to what Suzanne Keen, in her *Empathy and the Novel*, describes as empathy's context specificity, according to which: "Readers' empathy for situations depicted in fiction may be enhanced by chance relevance to particular historical, economic, cultural, or social circumstances, either in the moment of the first publication or in later times, fortuitously anticipated or prophetically foreseen by the novelist".¹⁷⁴

How 'fortuitous' or 'prophetic' Golding's empathic representation of Neanderthal animism in the novel may be, as already shown, has been the subject of much of the literary criticism and the highly emotionally charged responses it has received.¹⁷⁵ It is only through the reader's ability to empathise with the Neanderthals and their 'alien mind style' that the novel might indeed create the kind of repositioning between 'self' and 'other' that would lift the Neanderthals out of their 'subhumanity'. This is what constitutes "Golding's pity", as Barbara Everett writes:

The most tenderly "pitiful" of Golding's novels in practice is *The Inheritors* ... The story itself explains our double ancestry in terms of two children of the People, one eaten by the New Men and the other likely when fully grown to interbreed with them. But the whole book explains it too in the way that it involves the affection, the complicity, and then the shame of the reader. As a result of this double inheritance *The Inheritors* is "pitiful"; but it betrays at the same time that moral ambiguity of pity which by its conflicts generates much of the charge of Golding's writing.¹⁷⁶

The moral ambiguity Everett refers to lies in the fact that pity and shame experienced at the suffering of the 'ape-man like' Lok and his 'sadness' is also likely to ultimately serve as a reconfirmation of human (moral) superiority. In this sense, empathy (and even more so pity) are always in danger of being compromised by humanist anthropocentrism. However, it is also a prerequisite to get humans interested in the nonhuman (or in this case, the otherwise human) in the first place. It is this minimal empathic 'interest' that is fundamental to any 'theory of mind', as an "ability to attribute mental states to self and others and to interpret, predict, and explain behaviour in terms of mental states

The nature of particular entanglements and how and whether empathic responsiveness emerges (or doesn't) within them [i.e. apes] is an important area of study, and exploring empathy among other apes with this framework in mind may lead to insights not just about what apes can and can't do, but also how humans might rethink empathy and ethics. (p. 209)

For further comment please see "Interlude 3: Ape/Man", below. The eminent primatologist Frans de Waal claims that empathy is by no means an exclusively human characteristic. Indeed, in his work de Waal insists that humans should learn from nature's "lessons for a kinder society" (cf. Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009); see also his *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006)).

¹⁷⁴ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xii.

¹⁷⁵ Golding's case for the Neanderthals would probably fall under the categories of both 'ambassadorial' and 'broadcast strategic empathy' (cf. Keen, pp. 170-71). For further elaboration on the topic see Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, eds., *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁷⁶ Barbara Everett, "Golding's Pity", *William Golding: The Man and His Books – a Tribute on His 75th Birthday*, ed. John Carey, (London. Faber & Faber, 1986), 115, 116.

such as intentions, beliefs, and desires".¹⁷⁷ The kind of empathy necessary to recognize the Neanderthals as fellow humans thus involves a projection, an anticipation of a reciprocity and some form of 'emotional contagion' – a theory of mind projected towards the human other and the other human.¹⁷⁸ In *The Inheritors* this reciprocity is foregrounded: the (human) reader empathises with the (prehuman) other as this pre-or nonhuman mind itself empathically engages with the human mind that will prove to be its successor and thus its greatest threat. Empathy in this context could be seen not so much as a moral or 'humanizing' device but as a 'phatic' pre-condition for any 'encounter' worthy of that name to occur in the first place. Much like Emmanuel Levinas's primacy of ethics over ontology, empathy would thus function as precondition or 'imperative' for an encounter with any other (human, nonhuman, object...). While Levinas gives this imperative a human 'face', nonhuman or indeed posthuman and posthumanist forms of address are eminently thinkable and have in fact always been part of everyday experience. Once the specificity of the kind of encounter that is fictionalised in Golding's novel can be seen against the background of the general, postanthropocentric and posthumanist, idea of and the factual possibilities of nonhuman-human, as well as nonhuman-nonhuman forms of encounter, the notion of *before humanity* takes on its full meaning: it is the encounter with the human as well as the nonhuman which produces 'humanity'. The crux lies in the challenge to resist turning this 'fact' into some form of 'legitimation *post factum*', or, in other words, the challenge lies in alternative accounts of 'becoming human'.

Becoming Human?

It is a sobering but widely repressed fact that "[v]irtually all species that have ever lived have gone extinct".¹⁷⁹ The immediate consequence one might draw from this (arguably ultimate) blow to human narcissism is that: "We should not let the uniqueness of our species dupe us into believing

¹⁷⁷ Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 99.

¹⁷⁸ Zahavi traces the origins of the philosophical notion of empathy (*Einfühlung*) to the late 19th century German philosopher and psychologist Theodor Lipps, who specifically uses what could be called a fundamentally animistic thrust within empathy:

If I experience trees or mountains as animated or besouled, if I hear the wind and experience it as having a melancholy sound, or see a cloud and experience it as threatening, the source of such psychological content is in fact myself ... What is really happening is that I am projecting part of myself into these external objects ... and this is for Lipps what empathy more or less is about. To feel empathy is to experience a part of one's own psychological life as belonging to or in an external object; it is to penetrate and suffuse that object with one's own life. (p. 104)

This is precisely the kind of subjectivism and solipsism that Nagel has in mind when he wishes to turn away from empathy as a regulative mechanism for any objective 'alien phenomenology' (see above). However, more recent neurological findings on so-called 'mirror neurons' show that there are forms of empathy that are 'hard-wired' into human cognitive behaviour. See for example Heidi L. Maibom's very good "Introduction: (Almost) Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Empathy", In *Empathy and Morality*, ed. Heidi L. Maibom, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-40; as well as Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, eds., *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). In fact, this evolutionarily beneficial genetic and biological form of empathy is seen by the primatologist Frans de Waal as our "greatest hope" (in his *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*); cf. also my comments in "Interlude 3: Ape/Man", below, in that respect.

¹⁷⁹ Donald Johanson and Blake Edgar, *From Lucy to Language*, p. 107.

that we are the product of special forces”, as Robert Foley reminds us.¹⁸⁰ Transposed into the present context of my reading of Golding’s *The Inheritors* this means that:

The central questions of [*The Inheritors*] concern the nature and future of man and society. By placing us in the minds of our extinct cousins and then shifting us to the mind of Tuami, our spiritual and biological ancestor, Golding shows us imaginatively what was, what could have been and what we are. What he cannot show us is what we may become.¹⁸¹

Historically, Golding’s account of ‘becoming human’ in *The Inheritors* undoubtedly has to be placed within the humanist reaction to the inhuman atrocities committed in the first half of the 20th century. Paul Crawford refers to *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors* as “literature of atrocity” in which Golding “interrogates English ‘immunity’ from totalitarian violence”.¹⁸² Crawford thus sees Golding’s Neanderthals in typically post-Holocaust, anti-racist and humanitarian terms:

In *The Inheritors*, the “shock tactic” of breaking fantastic hesitation brings a startling recognition that “civilized” human beings commit genocide against those they project as monstrous “ogres” or devils. The Cro-Magnon people, progenitors of Homo sapiens, exterminate a race that, Boyd argues,¹⁸³ resemble the Jews. The fantastic tension between the real and unreal in all these novels is strongly evocative of the Holocaust experience and the kind of writing it provoked.¹⁸⁴

At the beginning of the 21st century, however, the context in which *The Inheritors* must be read is somewhat different. Not that genocide has been eradicated, maybe on the contrary, but the very notion of ‘humanity’ on which 20th-century humanitarian humanism was built may be about to implode due to a combination of ecological, technological and cultural changes. As Thomas Laqueur writes: “The very term ‘humanitarianism’ has long been suspect precisely because sentiments for humanity generally did not translate easily into care for humanity at hand”.¹⁸⁵

What has also come under serious attack is the humanist idea of a human nature, both in its evolutionary biological and its religious, philosophical or metaphysical version. The result is that human exceptionalism both from a scientific as well as from a philosophical point of view has become increasingly untenable and has been giving way to what I have already referred to as a posthumanist or postanthropocentric (world) view. Recent discussions about the ‘Anthropocene’ as a new geological period (beginning with 19th century industrialization, or indeed, as early as the ‘agricultural revolution’ in the Paleolithic, i.e. not that long after the fateful encounter between Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon)¹⁸⁶ in which humans become the single most influential (geomorphic)

¹⁸⁰ Foley, *Humans Before Humanity*, p. 214.

¹⁸¹ Hoover, *Language and Style in The Inheritors*, p. 18.

¹⁸² Paul Crawford, *Politics and History in William Golding: The World Turned Upside Down*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002, p. 50.

¹⁸³ Crawford here refers to Stephen J. Boyd, *The Novels of William Golding*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1988.

¹⁸⁴ Crawford, p. 52.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas W. Laqueur, “Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making of ‘Humanity’”, *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, eds. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 33.

¹⁸⁶ The geological notion of the “Anthropocene” is usually attributed to Paul J. Crutzen. I will discuss the Anthropocene in more detail in chapter 2 and “Ancestrality 4: Geology and Deep Time”, below. The *longue durée* version of the Anthropocene is sometimes seen as co-extensive with the rise of modern humans, at least since the “agricultural revolution”, 12,000 years ago. See for example Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, London: Vintage, 2015, pp. 83-116 (chapter 2, “The Anthropocene”). On the connection between Anthropocene, posthumanism and animism see Arne Johan Vetlesen’s *Cosmologies of the Anthropocene: Panpsychism, Animism, and the Limits of Posthumanism*, London: Routledge, 2019.

factor of climate change has also contributed to an ecological rethinking of ‘humanity’ within the context of dramatically diminishing biodiversity and human-induced environmental deterioration like global warming. On the one hand, humans are today called upon to reverse their exploitative and supremacist, or speciesist behaviour to avoid various catastrophic extinction scenarios, while, on the other hand, human exceptionalism is relativized by stressing the ‘entanglement’ between humans and nonhumans and their environments and the need for new materialist thinking (like the approaches we have seen in Jane Bennett, the speculative realists, or new feminist materialist thinkers like Karen Barad, Vicki Kirby or Rosi Braidotti). One of the side-effects of this development is also the outlined ‘retroactive’ change (or ‘reverse teleology’) projected onto the relationship with our ‘ancestors’. The erosion of the *species* ‘human’ and of the (moral) category ‘humanity’ is therefore closely related to and plays itself out in the crisis of paleoanthropology that I have been tracking through my reading (of readings) of Golding’s *The Inheritors*. If, as a result, we find ourselves (once more) *before humanity*, the aporia we again face is that neither exceptionalism nor inclusivity seems an adequate tactic in the time of ‘global climate catastrophe’ and the ‘posthuman condition’.

However, “why would one believe that mere species being is the foundation for treating someone else morally”¹⁸⁷, in the first place? In asking this question, Thomas Laqueur articulates the main anti-speciesist argument against humanism from a philosophical-logical point of view. But one might also employ a paleo-eco-anthropological perspective to see that any human relationship to prehumanity necessarily complicates human speciesism and exceptionalism, as Johanson and Edgar explain, in their reply to the question “Will Humans Become Extinct?”:

Extinction is as natural a process as speciation and evolution. Just as every individual life has its end, so every species, if we look back through the fossil record, ultimately comes to pass ... So, if strictly we consider the odds from the past, then yes, we are likely to go extinct. We are the sole survivors of a relatively small and unusual family of primates, which are a peculiar group of mammals. We have reached a position of unparalleled dominance in the natural world in terms of our use of diverse resources and ability to alter environments, often to detrimental effect ... As for us, the conditions for significant evolutionary change in our species have been greatly diminished, perhaps eliminated ... Culture is our key survival strategy, as long as we can keep the planet intact and alive.¹⁸⁸

The combination of ‘extinction angst’ in the face of climate change requires both a new humility as well as an increased responsibility for humans. Both extend ‘forward’ (to our ‘posthuman’ future) as well as ‘backward’ (into our ‘prehuman’ past):

To be good custodians of Earth, a responsibility our brains and adaptive capabilities impose on us, we must have the foresight to consider the extended future as well as the hindsight to take lessons from our ancient ancestors.¹⁸⁹

These, then, are the ancestral challenges in our current intellectual climate. Re-read in this context, as Anat Pick explains, *The Inheritors* remains relevant mainly because of its “creaturely (eco)poetics”¹⁹⁰ and its implied “possibility of transcending the distinctions of species”.¹⁹¹ For Pick, Golding’s importance lies in the fact that he “rejects anthropocentric history and opens up the historical to a nonhuman dimension, which, in his own historical reflections, Benjamin called the

¹⁸⁷ Laqueur, p. 31.

¹⁸⁸ Johanson and Edgar, *From Lucy to Language*, pp. 107, 111.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁹⁰ Anat Pick, “Neanderthal Poetics in William Golding’s *The Inheritors*”, *Creaturally Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 52-78.

¹⁹¹ Pick, p. 54.

creaturely".¹⁹² Reminding today's humans of their (shared) 'creatureliness' is a strategic move that brings together the anti-imperialism of postcolonial studies and the anti-speciesism of animal studies. However, I feel that this still does not do full justice to the Neanderthals and our responsibility towards the 'other humans' more generally – which can neither be fully grasped on the basis of (a shared) human exceptionalism nor through a more general (more-than-human) creaturely inclusivity. Prehumanity significantly complicates the question of 'subhumanity', racism and speciesism. The challenge contained in the phrase *before humanity* lies in the Neanderthals' (the prehumans' or the other humans') 'demythification'.¹⁹³ It raises the question Felipe Fernandez-Armesto raises about "the evolutionary predicament": "How should our common ancestors be classed: as human, or as non-human animals? (...) is humankind a coherent concept? At what point in the history of evolution might it make sense to distinguish humans from non-humans?"¹⁹⁴ The implications, as we have seen, lead to the impossible decision at our current crossroads, namely the one between 'becoming human'¹⁹⁵ and 'ceasing to be human'.¹⁹⁶ Neither version of this ultimate form of anthropogenic desire can be trusted, however, since in order to succeed, both imperatives would have to be obeyed *at the same time*.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁹³ Cf. Dietmar Kamper's introduction, "Der gemordete Träumer", In *Mythos Neanderthal: Ursprung und Zeitenwende*, eds. Dirk Matjekovski, Dietmar Kamper and Gerd-C. Weniger, (Frankfurt: Campus, 2001), 12: "The Neanderthal' is the body who, following Roland Barthes, lies at the bottom of history; history is against this body and is nourished by it; the body nurtures history, but it remains indifferent to it" (my translation; unless otherwise indicated all translations throughout this volume are mine).

¹⁹⁴ Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *So You Think You Are Human? A Brief History of Humankind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 126-27. The same concern is voiced by Walter Bodmer in his "Foreword" to *What Makes Us Human?* Ed. Charles Pasternak, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), xv:

Were they [i.e. the Neanderthals] still extant today, would we consider them human? Would that decision be affected if they were significantly less developed cognitively than modern humans? Would we grant them the same rights and privileges that are granted to all people, whatever their disabilities, in a modern civilized society? ... If Neanderthals are considered as human, when in hominid evolution was the threshold to humanity crossed?

¹⁹⁵ As Steven Connor explains in his "Foreword" to *Becoming Human: New Perspectives on the Inhuman Condition*, ed. Paul Sheehan, (Westport: Praeger, 2003): "To become human is always to become more, or less, than human" (p. xi).

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Gerald L. Bruns, *On Ceasing to Be Human*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). Bruns's conceptual point of departure for his journey around contemporary notions of the "vanishing human" are the two questions Jean-François Lyotard poses in *The Inhuman* with regard to humanism: "What if human beings, in humanism's sense, were in the process of becoming inhuman? And what if what is 'proper' to humankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman?" (Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 2; Bruns's quote is on p. 13).

¹⁹⁷ This is also why an *anti*-humanist stance à la Foucault ultimately cannot be trusted, as Connor makes clear: "If the face of the human is being effaced by the sand it may yet be possible to say of the human that nothing becomes it so well as the manner of its taking leave of itself" (Connor, "Foreword", p. xvi). The consequence, as I have been arguing, is to embrace the compromise of a *critical* posthumanism.