

## Chapter 2

### About to Forget ... the Human: On Max Frisch's *Man in the Holocene*

Die Literatur liefert (implizit) die Utopie, dass Menschsein anders sein könnte.<sup>1</sup>

We are about to forget ... despite, or maybe because of, the ever-increasing amount of information (rather than 'knowledge') and its 'processing', in which humans have to be increasingly 'assisted' by machines, and which, as opposed to humans, have unfailing memories (in theory at least). Forgetting can be a blessing, mostly, however, it is being experienced as a curse. It certainly is one of those cultural technologies (even though we do not seem to be in control of it) that seems to make 'us' human. It is when humans forget that they are human, or what it means to be human (although nobody has ever managed to produce a satisfactory answer to this question), that – so the received knowledge goes – the worst can happen. Forgetting one's humanity opens the door to the worst: a return to animality, becoming inhuman, the rule of the abject.

At the same time, since 'we' all said to live longer (at least in some privileged parts of the world), the problem of forgetting one's self, or forgetting who one 'is', i.e. the problem of dementia, is becoming a pressing socio-economic, cultural-political reality and as well as a real-life concern for more and more people – people who experience their own forgetting, their own gradual erasure, as well as those close to them, who experience what looks like a disintegration or dissolution of someone's self. One could say that dementia has two dimensions: auto- and hetero-forgetting. As old age, dementia, senility, Alzheimer etc. are gaining ground, more and more humans obviously dream of becoming 'posthuman' cyborgs with total data 'recall', maybe even 'immortal' bodies with perfect memories. The temptation, ultimately, might be to replace the biological or carbon-based human memory function completely, thus realising the dream of a Funes-like ability of absolute and indelible recording with endless storage capacity (banking on a technological solution to avoid the paranoia of Borges's famous character).<sup>2</sup>

One might argue therefore that there are at least two ways of forgetting to be human – one that points towards the self-deconstruction of human memory (i.e. senility); and one that has more to do with repression. Both are interesting from a psychoanalytic point of view, especially at the time when human memory is being increasingly 'exteriorised' (physically) by digital media.<sup>3</sup> The effect is that humans increasingly find themselves in a situation *vis-à-vis* their own forgetting that illustrates the double-dimensionality of the 'before' I am investigating here, that is to say, we are 'before' memory. 'We' 'find' 'ourselves' 'before' 'memory' (and are concerned with its 'loss'). Each word is here in scare quotes to emphasise that memory's precariousness signifies 'trouble'. Without memory no identity (no 'I', and certainly no 'we'). Finding hides the fact that in the process of 'remembering' – of putting memory and thus identity back together again – often looks more like a 'being found' in the sense of being captured by memories – a process that is beyond (cognition's) control, barely manageable nor reliable but also absolutely necessary, even while it remains one of the most fundamental (and supposedly most *human*) desires – nostalgia, melancholy – just remember Hamlet, for example. Memory – this mystery that no amount of neuro-cognitive

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<sup>1</sup> Max Frisch, *Schwarzes Quadrat: Zwei Poetikvorlesungen*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008), 62. [Literature (implicitly) produces the utopia that being human could be otherwise.]

<sup>2</sup> See Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, eds., *Cy-Borges: Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bernard Stiegler on hypomnemes and hypomnemata in "Memory", *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, eds. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 64-87.

science will ever be enough to explain; nor any philosophical sophistication, or anthropological description, for that matter – it erodes as we speak despite the most high-tech sophistication of our external memory apparatuses or pharmacological solutions. Even worse, nothing would be more deadly or dull than remembering everything, and even more so remembering everything exactly as it ‘really was’.

Which leaves us with the ‘before’ in the above statement and list of words in scare quotes: *before* memory, what was there? What does pre- or proto- or, indeed, non-memory look like? In other words, how did we get a memory *in the first place*? All these questions apart from a purely speculative, fictional, philosophical outlook also have a paleo-ontological dimension, alongside their evolutionary biological, neuro-cognitive or indeed speculative realist explanations. In fact, we are ‘before’ memory, overlooking its vast expanse beyond comprehension while moving on towards its unknowable future – memory is a ‘project’ in the sense that we have never been ‘memorious’ (in Funes’s sense) and probably never will be. The question is whether that is a good or a bad thing.

The greatest risk of this (our ‘posthuman’) moment, however, I would claim, is that we are about to forget ... the memory of the human, ironically – double genitive: the memorizing that humans (but also nonhumans) perform, as well as the memory of which the human is an ‘object’. While heading for the ‘posthuman’ some of us are thrown back to the ‘human’ (and what ‘it’ might have been) – not in an evolutionary or cognitively ‘regressive’ way, however, but more in a psychoanalytic-deconstructive vein – i.e. back to the question of *before*. Before as promise and as trace, even though both must ultimately remain unattainable. This would be a ‘paleopoetics’ in an entirely different sense<sup>4</sup> – remembering ‘before’ humanity. Not only to explain how we became human – there will never be enough evidence or a satisfactory explanation to feed our desire for exceptionalism – or indeed whether we ever have been or going to be (fully) human (the significance of which necessarily will always remain deferred). But the attempt (the counter-desire, so to speak) to step outside, if only for a moment, and to ask: if things had gone differently, what would ‘we’ be missing, if anything, if we had not taken this trajectory? Would we be re-membering the human differently? How to feed, or to ignore, this ‘yearning for the human’ that constitutes the very human – the most fundamental humanist urge that prompts (re)memorialization in the first place, especially and precisely at the time when one has the feeling that one is about to forget ...

Being about to forget thus remains ‘work in regress’, so to speak. What exactly do you remember when you remember that you are (only) human? One might ask, as if this was something that you somehow forgot to forget. The cultural technology or even the anthropotechnics of forgetting, before high-tech, is one of the key features of literature (alongside other fictional discourses and practices), especially in literary texts that play with the specularity of the abyss (*récits spéculaires*, *brisures*, *mises-en-abyme*, and so on).<sup>5</sup> They perform the abyss that is human memory, affect and identity so to speak. Even if the posthuman as such does rarely figure in literature (except for science fiction maybe), literature is in a sense always about a certain posthumansim, namely in that it is always concerned with the tragedy of forgetting. The posthumanism of and in literature thus reminds ‘us’ that we are (always) about to forget. And, on some rare occasions, literature

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<sup>4</sup> In contrast with Christopher Collins’s notion of ‘paleopoetics’ as an interest in the ‘prehistoric origins of literature’ as an evolutionary psychological extension of cognitive poetics towards a “prehistoric poesis [verbal creation] and the cognitive skills that must have made it possible”; cf. Christopher Collins, *Paleopoetics: The Evolution of the Preliterate Imagination*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 2; see also my more extensive discussion in “Chapter 1”, above.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lucien Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire: Essai sur la mise en abyme*, (Paris: Seuil, 1977).

specifically thematises or foregrounds this precariousness of the human and his or her memory. Then it shows humans who are about to forget, sometimes even as they forget who (or even what) they are. One such case is Max Frisch's novella *Man in the Holocene*.

#### *Herr Geiser Is Losing His Humanity ...*

... so viel Zeit hat der Mensch nicht [Man does not have that much time], the narrator of *Man in the Holocene* says.<sup>6</sup> The main character, 'Herr Geiser', is a seventy-four-year-old pensioner who has gone to live in a remote village in the Swiss Ticino mountains on his own. Living at the edge of civilization and isolation from other humans, Geiser appears in an almost ante-diluvian setting. In fact, the threat of a flood (and a climate cataclysm) is hanging over the village, as it has been an exceptionally wet summer with torrential rainfall. As a result, the village has been cut off and electricity has been disrupted by landslides. The breakdown of modern technology and the apocalyptic climatic situation is mirrored on a psychological level by Geiser's own gradual disintegration. His memory is failing him – probably signs of dementia or Alzheimer. In order to regain some control over the environment and himself, he begins to work on a mnemotechnics to counter the impression of both nature's and his own looming demise, as Francis Michael Sharp explains:

Prone to confusion and loss of memory, he employs two basic strategies. ... However characteristically human, both are futile, even foolish attempts in Frisch's eyes to exploit man's accumulated knowledge, particularly in its technical and applied forms, in a struggle with the vastly superior forces of nature. For most of the first part of the narrative, Geiser spends his time copying data from an encyclopedia, which he then tacks to the walls, a ritual he later makes more efficient by cutting the scraps of information directly out of his source books. With the names, facts, figures, and historical information from diverse branches of learning surrounding him, he seeks to ward off the forgetfulness that signifies his aging and thus his mortality. At the midpoint in the narrative, Geiser makes an abortive attempt to flee through the mountains back to Basel, a symbolic return to a world cushioned against the ravages of nature by man's inventions.<sup>7</sup>

Both strategies fail, however. The scraps pinned to the wall are blown off and scattered by the wind and at the end of the narrative, exhausted after his aborted trip across the mountains into the next valley, Geiser suffers a stroke, which leaves his eyelid and one corner of his mouth paralysed. This is the state he is in when he is found at the end of the novella by his daughter who has come up from Basel to check on him.

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<sup>6</sup> Max Frisch, *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän – Eine Erzählung*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 48; Frisch, *Man in the Holocene: A Story*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton, (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1980), 35. Further references will be given in the text as *Man* (plus page number). Except for the few cases indicated I have used Skelton's generally excellent translation. One of these exceptions, however, concerns the epigraph above. In this specific case, I have altered Skelton's translation from "no one has that much time" to "man does not have that much time", for reasons that will hopefully become obvious in the course of my 'geological' or 'geopoetical' reading of Frisch's story. It is also worth mentioning that the English title drops an important nuance of the original which literally translates as 'Man *appears* in the Holocene', which is wrong, factually or geologically speaking, but already announces one of the major uncertainties about memory and 'becoming human' that Frisch's story will go on to thematise.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Michael Sharp, "Max Frisch: A Writer in a Technological Age", In *Twayne's Companion to Contemporary Literature*, vol 2, ed. Pamela A. Genova, (New York: Thompson Gale, 2002), 1406.

While Frisch's novella took some time to receive the attention it deserved in the German-speaking world, its English translation was immediately included in the *New York Book Review's* list of Best Books of 1980. It was referred to as a "luminous parable of indeterminate purport" and as a "masterpiece" by the reviewer, George Stade (June 22, 1980), as well as "a chillingly beautiful portrait of a man who is surrounded by erosion, nature's and his own, and who struggles for one last moment of clarity in which to make sense of himself and of civilization".<sup>8</sup> As the novelist Michael Magras claims: "*Holocene* reminds you of the extraordinary cruelty of human existence, and of its stubborn durability. Life may be as fragile and ridiculous as a pagoda made of crispbread, yet it's also strong enough to withstand epochs of extinction. No matter how hard we try otherwise, we're still here".<sup>9</sup> Today, Magras's dogged optimism in the face of the apocalyptic nuclear threat of the late stages of the Cold War, arguably has given way to an even more imminent set of natural cataclysms, extinction threats and species angst in the light of global warming, rising sea levels, the greenhouse effect, the thinning of the ozone layer, the depletion of natural resources, to an extent where scientists are gradually reaching an agreement that, at least for the past two centuries, we might have been living in an entirely new geological period, the first in which climate change is mainly brought about by human 'geomorphic' activity: the Anthropocene. So while humans have established themselves in the Holocene (while *appearing* in the Pleistocene), they are likely to be in the process of bringing about their own disappearance in what may come to be known as the (Post)Anthropocene.<sup>10</sup>

One of the first interpretations of *Man on the Holocene*, by Michael Butler, in a special issue on Max Frisch in *World Literature Today*, in 1986, speaks of the "remarkable fusion of form and content through which gradual loss of coherence is expressed with an ironically brilliant articulacy".<sup>11</sup> As Frisch's major achievement in the novella Butler sees "the peculiarly dual perspective of the *erlebte Rede* or 'narrated monologue' technique" and the "flexible narrative position, which could easily oscillate between detachment and empathy".<sup>12</sup> The shift between empathy and detachment produced in this way allows for a sharing of the progressive disorientation of Geiser while simultaneously making the reader observe this process almost 'clinically'. Geiser is aware of the fundamental absurdity of his situation and his attempt at keeping his self-reassurance by gaining epistemological, encyclopaedic certainty and a renewed trust in 'facts' through cutting out extracts from *Der Große Brockhaus* encyclopedia, as well as from some dictionaries and natural history books. This desperate attempt at retaining control through securing knowledge and, by returning to his 'Enlightenment' reflexes, in order to still feel 'at home' in the world, becomes progressively undermined by Geiser's failing memory<sup>13</sup> – a process that is already announced in the first

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<sup>8</sup> Available online at: <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1980/11/30/111820894.html> (accessed 19 December 2020).

<sup>9</sup> See Michael Magras's book review available at: <https://michaelmagras.wordpress.com/2010/07/29/man-in-the-holocene/> (accessed 19 December 2020).

<sup>10</sup> The notion of the Anthropocene is usually attributed to the atmospheric chemist, Paul Crutzen. See further discussion below.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Butler, "Max Frisch's *Man in the Holocene*: An Interpretation", *World Literature Today* 60.4 (1986): 574.

<sup>12</sup> Butler, p. 575.

<sup>13</sup> Frisch's views on the failure of the Enlightenment are expressed in his "Solothurn speech" (1985), published as "Am Ende der Aufklärung steht das Goldene Kalb", *DU: Die Zeitschrift für Kultur*, 51 (1991): 119-127:

Science without moral reason and consequently science research whose consequences no-one is responsible for, this is more than a deficit, but indeed a perversion of Enlightenment, which

pages: "It is not so much the bad weather. ... What would be bad would be losing one's memory. ... No knowledge without memory" (*Man*, 5-6). In the end, Geiser's *Zettelwand* – a wall full of paper scraps – turns out to be an absolutely useless mnemotechnic device since it lacks a narrative structure that only (human) memory can provide. His situation is therefore not surprisingly likened by Butler to a Camusian existentialist-humanist (post-enlightenment) absurdity:

There is a distinct echo of the Sisyphus myth in the image of Herr Geiser's striving toward a goal, only to lose his grip at the last moment. However, the relatively robust humanism which caused Camus forty years ago to imagine *his* Sisyphus a happy man is shown as deeply questionable in Frisch's hero. Whatever insights the journey has given Herr Geiser, they do not lead him to any form of permanent enlightenment.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, arguably, the existential humanism that inspired Camus' ultimately optimistic (or at least, non-nihilistic) affirmation of human freedom in the face of absurdity, is crumbling in Frisch's 'posthumanist' tale of failing human memory – a failing both at the individual and the species level.

Interestingly, this apocalyptic vision of individual and species cataclysm urges Geiser to return to prehistory – the time *before* the human, the time of human emergence, and, more precisely, the (geologic, deep) time of *stone*. This almost feels, according to Butler, like a reverse form of evolution, in which Geiser starts seeing himself as a 'lizard' (or as one of those extinct lizard-like dinosaurs):

The promise of the humanist thirst for knowledge proves a hollow one; the fate which he foresees and desperately tries to resist is the humiliating regression to the evolutionary stage of the lowly lizard.<sup>15</sup>

As Gerhard Kaiser explains, Geiser is fascinated by the prehistoric extinct dinosaurs he encounters in his encyclopaedia to the extent that he almost identifies with the newt that finds its way into his bath tub. In the end he more and more resembles an amphibious creature himself.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, by way of contextualization, Walter Obschlager reminds us of the motif of amphibiousness throughout Frisch's work:

With striking frequency, Frisch's works evoke images of amphibians and reptiles in the context of age and human aging. There is a scene in *Homo Faber* in which Walter Faber looks at Hanna and notices that she is aging rather well, except for the skin beneath her chin, which reminds him of lizard skin.<sup>17</sup>

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was supposed to make us mature. Enlightenment today is revolt against the superstition of technology, which antiquates man, as Günter Anders calls it, and which leads to powerlessness in the face of technology. All this would be alarming enough, but is not efficient as alarm in a society which insists on the idea that reasonable is what is profitable. Yes, much has gone away! At the end of the Enlightenment is thus not mature man, as Kant and the Enlightenment philosophers hoped, but the Golden Calf that we already knew from the Old Testament. (p. 126)

<sup>14</sup> Butler, p. 578.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Gerhard Kaiser, "Endspiel im Tessin: Max Frischs unentdeckte Erzählung 'Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän'", *Schweizer Monatshefte* 82/83 (2002/2003): 52.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Obschlager, "Man, Culture, and Nature in Max Frisch's *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*", In *A Companion to the Works of Max Frisch*, ed. Olaf Berwald, (Rochester: Camden House, 2013), 204.

*Man in the Holocene* – and its extremely pessimistic view of aging, a view that can also be seen in frequent comments about the threat of decrepitude in Frisch's diaries – is seen by Franz Haberl as "a most significant expression of Max Frisch's personal eschatology".<sup>18</sup>

Like most principal characters in Frisch's work, Geiser is in a situation and location from which he cannot really escape and is thus forced to take stock of his past, present and future existence. However, Geiser is particular in seeing himself within a wider historical or even prehistorical context:

From the history of natural disasters and the determination of the people to rebuild and resettle, Herr Geiser goes back to the history of the earth, its geologic periods, its rock formations, the appearance and disappearance of oceans, mountains, forests, dinosaurs.<sup>19</sup>

More specifically, Geiser remembers his visit to Iceland and its rough landscape shaped by glaciers and volcanoes. In fact, his very name, bears an affinity to the Icelandic geysirs, as a number of commentators have pointed out. Most importantly, this symbolic and epistemological 'retreat' to prehistory, to a time before the human and a time of the emergence of the human (as mentioned above: *Man appears* in the Holocene, is the literal translation of the German title), produces what I would call a 'postanthropocentric' perspective. Postanthropocentric not in the sense of a time 'after' the human – which, arguably, is the most common understanding of the terms 'posthuman' and 'posthumanism' – but a time in which humanity is thrown back to its origins and the renewed challenge that the legitimation of a humanist anthropocentric world view poses. What *Holocene* shares with the contemporary moment – even though it was written during the final, 'apocalyptic', years of the Cold War with their very own looming environmental disaster and extinction event of a global nuclear war – is thus an uncertainty about the place of the human within history (or time), nature and technology.

Geiser, consequently, reflects on time and history 'outside' the human and the fact that "Only human beings can recognize catastrophes, provided they survive them; Nature recognizes no catastrophes" (*Man*, 79). When his daughter appears at the end, when Geiser is already stunned by the stroke he has suffered, the narrator casts a very harsh verdict on Geiser's (or man's) attempt to secure human knowledge through memory:

The ants Geiser recently observed under a dripping fir tree are not concerned with what anyone might know about them; nor were the dinosaurs, which died out *before* a human being set eyes on them. All the papers, whether on the wall or on the carpet, can go. Who cares about the Holocene? Nature needs no names. Geiser knows that. The rocks do not need his memory. (*Man*, 107; my emphasis)

In passages like these, which allude to a return towards prehistoric time before the human, and which allow for a postanthropocentrism by hindsight, so to speak, Frisch's novella anticipates current texts that, according to Adam Trexler, can be classified as 'Anthropocene fiction'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Franz P. Haberl, "Death and Transcendence in Max Frisch's *Triptych* and *Man in the Holocene*", *World Literature Today* 60.4 (1986): 585.

<sup>19</sup> Wulf Koepke, "Retreat into Prehistory", *World Literature Today* 60.4 (1986): 586.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015). This move is also shared by a recent article on Holocene by Bernhard Malkmus, "'Man in the Anthropocene': Max Frisch's Environmental History", *PMLA* 132.1 (2017): 71-85: "*Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* ... can be read as a reflection on the Anthropocene *avant la lettre*" (p. 72).

### *Catastrophe, Ecocide and Extinction in Man in the Holocene*

*Man in the Holocene* could thus be seen as an early example of the 'novel in a time of climate change' and might thus contribute to activating the "imaginative processes that are fundamental to engaging with climate change".<sup>21</sup> As Trexler explains: "there is a considerable archive of climate change fiction. Human-altered climates were of grave concern to authors before greenhouse gas emissions attracted wide scientific interest".<sup>22</sup> But while "nearly all Anthropocene fiction addresses the historical tension between the existence of catastrophic global warming and the failed obligation to act",<sup>23</sup> *Man in the Holocene* arguably already goes one step further by creating an analogy between natural erosion and human aging, both at an individual and at a species level, in conjunction with a return to 'deep time', 'prehistory' and the time *before* humanity.<sup>24</sup> The particular challenge that the scale of climate change poses for a genre like the novel (or, in this case, a novella)<sup>25</sup> and fiction more generally, namely the tension between formal experiment, realism and empathy, through identification with (human) characters, or the problem of 'agency', is met by Frisch through a sophisticated narrative ambiguity (of which more below). Above all, *Man in the Holocene* achieves the conjunction of individual and species consciousness in the face of, what Timothy Morton refers to as a 'hyperobject',<sup>26</sup> namely climate change, extinction and, in Frisch's scenario, a new ice age,<sup>27</sup> by a radical deconstruction of both Geiser's 'humanism' and his 'humanity'. In this sense, Frisch's novella could also be seen as another example of what we called 'posthumanism without technology', or, more precisely, as a climate change novel without science fiction.<sup>28</sup>

The importance of an apocalyptic imagination in the face of nuclear and ecological catastrophe in the late 1970s and 1980s was captured in Günter Grass's Antonio-Feltrinelli Prize speech in Rome in 1982, entitled "Die Vernichtung der Menschheit hat begonnen [The

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<sup>21</sup> Trexler, p. 5. Apart from Bernhard Malkmus's article there is as yet, to my knowledge, only one other recent contribution to Frisch criticism that specifically addresses *Holocene's* place within ecocriticism: Urte Stobbe, "Evolution und Resignation. Zur Verbindung von Klima-, Erd- und Menschengeschichte in Max Frischs *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*", *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 24.2 (2014): 356-70.

<sup>22</sup> Trexler, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> The published version of *Man in the Holocene* that appeared in 1979 had in fact a long prehistory itself, with many revisions and stylistic changes, especially as far as narrative technique is concerned (see below). The story started out as a draft called "Regen" [rain], in 1974, which was renamed into "Klima" [climate], in which Geiser was introduced as a former specialist in climate control technology. Subsequently, the story gradually takes on a 'geological' and 'prehistorical' dimension or strata (cf. Walter Schmitz, *Max Frisch: Das Spätwerk (1962-1982): Eine Einführung*, (Tübingen: Francke, 1984), 143-48).

<sup>25</sup> On the problem of scale see Timothy Clark, "Scale", In *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, volume 1, ed. Tom Cohen, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 148-166; and Stefan Herbrechter, "Perdre la mesure ... Or, The Ecologies of Extinction", *CounterText* 2.1 (2016): 15-30.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> For a contemporary geological account of the possibility of a new ice age see Jan Zalasiewicz and Mark Williams, *The Goldilocks Planet: The Four Billion Year Story of Earth's Climate*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> For the idea of a 'posthumanism without technology', see Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "Critical Posthumanism or, the *inventio* of a posthumanism without technology", *Subject Matters* 3.274.1: 15-30.

annihilation of humanity has begun]”.<sup>29</sup> Frisch’s own version of this apocalyptic imagination – or literature’s “cultivation of catastrophe”, as Peter Utz calls it<sup>30</sup> – is encapsulated in the quotation from *Man in the Holocene* referred to above: “only human beings can recognize catastrophes, provided they survive them; Nature recognizes no catastrophes” (*Man*, 79), which Utz uses as the starting point for his wider investigation into the catastrophic.<sup>31</sup> The central mirroring function on which the plot of this novella turns is the analogy between Geiser’s personal catastrophe (his loss of memory and thus the loss of control over his environment, and the subsequent realization of his finality, which is reinforced or confirmed, in the end, by the stroke, so to speak) with the signs of erosion around him (the rain, the landslides, the television news full of natural disasters). As Jürgen Barkhoff puts it: “In *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* Frisch is neither concerned with day-to-day environmental politics nor with a general criticism of our technological age as put forward in his *Homo faber*. Instead he uses an exemplary individual case to demonstrate the ephemeral status of the human species in the context of the overwhelming history of nature”.<sup>32</sup>

The individual catastrophe emblematic of the fate of the species, for Frisch, is aging and the hopelessness it brings with it. *Man in the Holocene*, in this respect, is Frisch’s most ruthless and resigned text, characterised by what Hans Blumenberg refers to as the narcissistic wound that arises from the non-coincidence of ‘*Lebenszeit* [life time]’ and ‘*Weltzeit* [world time]’:

Consciousness of the fact that one is inserted as a kind of episode between natality and mortality within the course of the world – first as the moment of an individual and then also as that of the species – arises from the simple but not at all obvious perception that the world will neither end nor did it begin with our own life.<sup>33</sup>

To be outlived by a world that is visibly indifferent to individual or species extinction thus seems to be what Geiser intimates in one of his final thoughts: “Who cares about the Holocene? Nature needs no names. Geiser knows that. The rocks do not need his memory”

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<sup>29</sup> Günter Grass, “Die Vernichtung der Menschheit hat begonnen”, *Essays, Reden, Briefe, Kommentare, Werkausgabe in Zehn Bänden, Band IX*, (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1987), 830-1.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Utz, *Die Kultivierung der Katastrophe: Literarische Untergangsszenarien aus der Schweiz*, (München: Fink, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> “A catastrophe causes the rupture of culture’s skin” (Utz, p. 9). Axel Goodbody also refers to the phenomenon of ‘catastrophism’ in his “Catastrophism in Post-war German Literature”, In *Green Thought in German Culture: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Colin Riordan, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 159-80:

Literature and non-fiction on man’s degradation and destruction of the natural environment, the dangers facing mankind through over-population, the extinction of species, pollution, and the horrific consequences of a possible nuclear war painted an overwhelmingly negative picture of the history of mankind, culminating more often than not in a disaster wiping out modern civilization. (p. 159)

Goodbody’s final verdict nevertheless is that: “catastrophist literature has acted as a corrective in a predominantly anthropocentric and technocratic culture, disseminating and elaborating green ideas, and sketching out social alternatives” (p. 176). Although Goodbody does not refer to *Man in the Holocene* specifically, Frisch’s novella can undoubtedly be seen as just such a critique of anthropocentrism and technocracy, even though it may not provide any ‘social alternatives’.

<sup>32</sup> Jürgen Barkhoff, “Green Thought in Modern Swiss Literature”, In *Green Thought in German Culture: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Colin Riordan, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 229.

<sup>33</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 79.



(*Man*, 107).<sup>34</sup> This finality (the time between natality and mortality) equally applies at a species level, even though the time span is much longer. This is, for example, one of the ways in which the title of Frisch's novella – *Man* appears in the *Holocene* – may be understood as indeed 'correct', as Wolfgang Riedel remarks:

Which man is meant here? It cannot be the species *homo*. Neither the kind that survives today, *homo sapiens*, because it already appeared two hundred thousand years ago, in the Pleistocene (the Ice age). The Holocene (post-Ice Age or our geological present) begins much later, around twelve thousand years ago. And at this point it is not a new species that appeared, but merely a new cultural variant characterised by sedentariness, agriculture, animal farming and pottery – the so-called 'Neolithic revolution'. The kind of human who begins as *homo faber* to take over the world, the human of modern civilization, in whose lineage engineers like Herr Geiser stand studying the relevant encyclopedia article – this human indeed only appears in the Holocene.<sup>35</sup>

For Riedel, the postanthropocentric perspective that here emerges in what he refers to as "the crisis of humanism",<sup>36</sup> opens onto a literature 'beyond' the human. For my current purposes, however, I prefer to read Frisch's novella as an example of 'climate change fiction' that, in stressing the mortality of the species through the example of a specific individual, throws us, not forward into a posthuman future, but, indeed, backwards to a time *before* humanity.

#### *Forgetting and Geiser's Mnemotechnics*

Having read Frisch's novella, one is tempted to 'complete' its title, 'Man appears in the Holocene', by adding 'and today is about to disappear'. Apart from its apocalyptic theme, however, what is most remarkable about Frisch's story is the narrative technique it employs, and the restraint and the almost ruthless way in which Geiser's 'decomposition' is rendered for the reader. Karlheinz Rossbacher summarizes the extraordinary narrative qualities of the story:

The radicality with which Frisch writes on aging and morbidity 'from inside'; the peculiar narrative style which turns the reader into the co-producer of the relay of meanings; the process of a particular usage of negation that turns comforting phrases into uncomfortable ones; the interconnection of a world historical perspective with that of the downfall of one human being; the insistence on an Enlightenment position, despite everything that speaks against it, through a changed view of nature.<sup>37</sup>

The psychological, 'insider's' perspective of Geiser's dementia and the resulting anxiety are generally hailed as Frisch's major achievement in this story, which treats confusion with absolute and almost clinical clarity and honesty to avoid the danger of self-indulgence and

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Claus Erhart, "'Herr Geiser ist kein Lurch.' Apokalyptisches bei Max Frisch", *Cahiers d'Etudes Germaniques* 51 (2006): 159-71. Erhart investigates Geiser's strategies of narrowing the gap or even transcending the difference between '*Lebenszeit*' and '*Weltzeit*'.

<sup>35</sup> Wolfgang Riedel, "'Der Prozess der Geschichte ist ein Verbrennen'. Erzählte Entropie bei Koeppen und Frisch", in Friederike Felicitas Günther and Torsten Hoffmann, eds., *Anthropologien der Endlichkeit*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011, p. 258.

<sup>36</sup> Riedel, p. 258.

<sup>37</sup> Karlheinz Rossbacher, "Lesevorgänge: Zu Max Frischs Erzählung *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*", in Paul Michael Lützeler, ed., *Zeitgenossenschaft: Zur deutschsprachigen Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1978, pp. 252-53.

(self-)pity. It is also the 'power of negation' that plays an important part – Geiser's thoughts are presented and immediately negated, which creates a constant change of perspective between a third person narrator who speaks from 'inside' Geiser's mind and a third person narrator who seems to reverse this perspective into a description from 'outside'. The reader thus has the impression of a schizophrenia-in-the-making: Geiser is describing himself as an other (i.e. in the third person) in the ghostly presence of another other, however, who provides a clinical comment of Geiser's demise but without any judgement or pity. Take for example this passage in the middle of the story:

There is always something to do.

So one would imagine ... – that is what Geiser is thinking.

When Geiser goes back to the window to convince himself, by watching the slowly gliding raindrops, that time is not standing still – and in the whole of history it has never done that! – and when he cannot resist looking at his watch again, it reads seven minutes past six ...

The other noise:

Footsteps in the house, his own – (*Man*, 66-67)

The passage also shows Geiser's puzzlement regarding the discontinuity between his personal life time and the cosmic dimension of time (and space), or 'geological' (deep) time.

Another crucial feature of the story is the fact that it is in fact a 'montage' – the encyclopaedia articles, handwritten notes and little drawings, graphs and illustrations are reproduced and inserted into the narrative at various stages, almost as illustrations of Geiser's thoughts, pinned to the narrative like the scraps of paper that Geiser tacks to the walls of his house. These illustrate but also disrupt the narrative to stop any impression of a traditional narrative arc or flow from developing – Geiser distrusts novels and instead favours the factual style of science: "(Novels are no use at all on days like these, they deal with people and their relationships, with themselves and others, fathers and mothers and daughters and sons, lovers, etc., with individual souls, usually unhappy ones, with society, etc., as if the place for these things were assured, the earth for all time earth, the sea level fixed for all time.)" (*Man*, 8).

Apart from the detached '(geo)scientific' effect this produces – the interconnection between the individual fate and deep time mentioned above (and which, to recall, is one of the most important endeavours of climate change fiction, with its particular challenge of bridging the vast differences in scale between individual human action and cosmic changes) – from a narrative point of view, the story keeps breaking down, repeating and watching its own de(con)struction, like the 'pagoda of crispbread' Geiser is seen to be building at the beginning and which keeps collapsing as soon as the fourth layer is added:

It should be possible to build a pagoda of crispbread, to think of nothing, to hear no thunder, no rain, no splashing from the gutter, no gurgling around the house. Perhaps no pagoda will emerge, but the night will pass. ... It is always with the fourth floor that the wobbling begins; a trembling hand as the next piece of crispbread is put in place, a cough when the gable is already standing, and the whole thing lies in ruins – (*Man*, 3)

Just like the crispbread, nature slides (cf. Geiser's fear of actual, current and past, and imagined landslides), as memory slips and slides, constantly, until, in the end, Geiser has to realise: "There will never be a pagoda – Geiser knows that" (*Man*, 106).

Other stylistic elements signal the disjuncture between the generic conventions of the novel and other nonfictional texts. There is a bibliography at the end that covers the collage of scraps used by Geiser, pinned to the wall as well as pinned to the story. These scraps are not just cited but reproduced in their 'original' form and typeface which foregrounds their *material* intrusion and iconicity as they are *stuck* to the narrative as mnemotechnic devices. Several commentators have seized on Frisch's comparison between the absurdity of Geiser's obsession with his collage, or cut and paste, technique and the famous ironic treatment of encyclopaedic obsession in Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.<sup>38</sup> The fascinating thing is, however, as Robert Cohen points out that:

The texts on the paper scraps [*Zetteltexte*] are just as much calling for interpretation as their surrounding authorial text. They are of little use as far as determining the state of modern knowledge is concerned. Their selection depends on a figure whose mind is decaying. By contrast, their meaning – and the art of Frisch's collage – resides in the fact that they communicate this decay. One reads them through Geiser's eyes; one tries to understand, what in them he might be interested in; and one tries, to read his mental state through them.<sup>39</sup>

Frisch's achievement becomes even more salient, if one compares *Man in the Holocene* with one of its earlier drafts, reproduced as "Fragment aus einer Erzählung" in Frisch's collected works,<sup>40</sup> in which an intrusive narrator keeps addressing Geiser directly and almost reproachfully: "Herr Geiser, what are you thinking? ... It is night time, Herr Geiser, it is night. You forgot that it's night time. No need to be anxious. It is dark, because it is the night".<sup>41</sup> Claudia Müller's investigation into subjectivity and narration in Max Frisch's (and Friedrich Dürrenmatt's) late works follows the 'genetic developments' of *Man in the Holocene* very closely.<sup>42</sup> In *Montauk*, Frisch refers to a story started in 1972 (and having undergone many rewritings) by saying: "A literary story set in Ticino has failed for the fourth time [maybe an analogy with Geiser's 'pagoda'?]; the narrator position is unconvincing".<sup>43</sup> It is only when Frisch abandons the first person narrator perspective and moves towards a split third person that the desired detachment is finally achieved. In a sense, the narrator has become one with his character and both turn increasingly unstable, which, according to Müller, makes the narrative "flicker towards the end like a dying candle".<sup>44</sup> The effect is that of a "destabilising of the reader" who can never be sure where to position him- or herself – i.e. inside or outside the main character. This, according to Müller, leads to a 'dialogue' between the reader and the gaps and silences in the text: "Like Geiser, the reader is forced to reconstruct bits of reality out of the blanks between the words and sections".<sup>45</sup> Ironically, however, as this fusion progresses, the reader is forced to develop an autonomy and a freedom in order to create his or her own impression of the events and developments that have been affecting Geiser, all the while Geiser himself is seen to be gradually losing this autonomy. The effect is that of witnessing a psychological breakdown 'from inside', or of a 'humanity' that is about to forget itself, as I would argue.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. For example Robert Cohen, "Zumutungen der Spätmoderne: Max Frischs *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*", *Weimarer Beiträge* 54 (2008): 549-50.

<sup>39</sup> Cohen, p. 553.

<sup>40</sup> In Max Frisch, *Gesammelte Werke in zeitlicher Folge*, vol. 6.2 (1968-1975), (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), 522-34.

<sup>41</sup> Frisch, "Fragment aus einer Erzählung", p. 523.

<sup>42</sup> Claudia Müller, "*Ich habe viele Namen*" – Polyphonie und Dialogizität im autobiographischen Spätwerk Max Frischs und Friedrich Dürrenmatts, (München: Fink, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Müller, p. 64.

<sup>44</sup> Müller, p. 81.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

This 'erosion' – which is without doubt the leitmotiv of the story – and which brings together Geiser's individual fate and the fate of the species in the face of some planetary apocalypse – ultimately mirrors a cognitive breakdown of the fundamental dichotomy between self and world. This raises the question of how to speak of or with one's self in the face of an inescapable process of (self)annihilation – a quandary that 'humanity' faces as a whole in 'postanthropocentric' or 'posthuman' times.

### *Verzettlung*<sup>46</sup>

In his solitude, Geiser's strategy is that of securing knowledge through memorization – the ingrained Enlightenment instinct that tells him "No knowledge without memory" (*Man*, 6). His library contains a number of 'factual' books he prefers to the novels his wife used to read:

*Brighter than a Thousand Suns* ... the diary of Captain Scott ... the Bible ... the twelve-volume encyclopaedia [*Der Grosse Brockhaus*] ... garden books, a book on snakes, a history of the canton of Ticino, the Swiss encyclopaedia ... picture books for the grandchildren (*The World We Live in*), the *Duden* dictionary of foreign words, and a book about Iceland ... as well as maps and rambling guides that provide information about the geology, climate, history, etc., of the district. (*Man*, 10)

Geiser starts by copying all kinds of bits of information onto scraps of paper until he realises that cutting and pasting is a more efficient technique: "It is idiotic to write out in one's own hand (in the evenings by candlelight) things already in print. Why not use scissors to cut out items that are worth remembering and deserve a place on the wall?" (*Man*, 35). In the end, however, there are cuttings and papers everywhere and Geiser's attempt at recreating order in his brain to preserve his memory fails as his house and he himself is being submerged with unstructured 'information'.

The scraps of paper (*Zettel* in German) on the wall, fall down, lie around awaiting their orderly pinning to the wall. German uses the reflexive verb *sich verzetteln* to describe a state of being gradually undone by a lack of a sense of direction, of losing one's way.<sup>47</sup> Claudia Müller, in a chapter entitled "Die Verzettlung des Herrn Geiser", speaks of the way Geiser's subjectivity is gradually undone by the materiality of the 'medium' he has chosen to access and safeguard his knowledge, memory and identity.<sup>48</sup> One problem are the thumbtacks that do not stick to the wall but only to the wood panelling, which only covers the living room. Elsewhere, the thumbtacks damage but do not stay in the walls so that the paper scraps just fall down. As Geiser's exasperation with his material *Verzettlung* grows, so does his anxiety of further losing his memory and thus control over his situation:

The walls in the living room will provide nowhere near enough space, particularly since his paper slips must be affixed neither too high nor too low; otherwise, every time Geiser forgets what he so carefully cut out an hour ago, he will have to climb on a chair or crouch on his heels to read his pieces of paper. This is not only laborious, it also prevents an overall review, and once already the chair nearly capsized. Where,

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<sup>46</sup> The usual English translation of *Verzettlung* by 'dispersal' is inadequate in this context. The image here, literally, evokes losing one's bearings and thus oneself in one's notes, papers, or scraps.

<sup>47</sup> For an investigation into the archival technique of 'card indexing' [*Zettelkasten*] as a pre-Enlightenment and pre-encyclopaedic media technology see Helmut Zedelmeier, "Buch, Exzerpt, Zettelschrank, Zettelkasten", in *Archivprozesse: Die Kommunikation der Aufbewahrung*, eds. Hedwig Pompe and Leander Scholz, (Köln: DuMont, 2002), 38-53.

<sup>48</sup> Müller, pp. 82-87.

for example, is the information about the conjectural brain of Neanderthal man? Instead, one finds oneself back with the drawing of the golden section. Where is the information about mutations, chromosomes, etc.? It is all so exasperating ... (*Man*, 38)

Further material obstacles lie in the fact that the cut out paper slips start to curl, that there is not enough glue in the house, and that there is the constant danger that “when one opens a window, creating a draft, the whole wall flutters and rustles” (*Man*, 39). In the end, Geiser realises: “It is no longer a living room” (*ibid.*, i.e. a room to “live in”; cf. the German *Wohnzimmer*). Later on, the scissors break (*Man*, 60), the thumbtacks run out, and Geiser has to revert to using ‘Magic Tape’, which sticks to the plaster (63). His glasses break and he has to start reading with a magnifying glass (65). “Man”, as Geiser realises, “remains an amateur” (60). In the end, when his daughter Corinne opens the door to find Geiser after his stroke, “the slips of paper are lying on the floor, a confused heap that makes no sense” (106), just like Geiser himself.

There is another practical problem with Geiser’s ‘method’: “Something Geiser has not taken onto account: that the text on the back of the page might perhaps be not less illuminating than the picture on the front that he has so carefully cut out; now this text has been cut to pieces, useless for his gallery” (*Man*, 89). The real ‘disconnect’ however lies in the fact that Geiser gradually forgets the motivation that lay behind the initial selection of a specific cutting and which memory (and knowledge) are based:

Now and again Geiser finds himself wondering what he really wants to know, what he hopes to gain from all this knowledge. (90)

Standing before his gallery, Geiser cannot remember what gave him the idea of cutting out illustrations of dinosaurs and lizards and sticking them to the wall – There were never any dinosaurs in Ticino. (95)

It seems that in his attempt at archiving his knowledge – and maybe this is true of ‘human’ knowledge, the knowledge of the species more generally – the old man, Geiser, has succumbed to a serious strain of ‘archive fever’.<sup>49</sup> In the construction of his archive, in the selection process of knowledge, Geiser has in fact contributed to the (further) destruction of knowledge. He has literally ‘scrapped’ his library, and in ‘externalising’ and compartmentalising his knowledge and memory by sticking it to a wall he may have in fact achieved the opposite effect to what he intended, as Müller remarks:

his memory notes [*Erinnerungszettel*] are not able to constitute him as a person: his attempt to reconstruct the world that is slipping away from him through a memory of scraps [*Zettelgedächtnis*] on the wall fails. In searching for the origin of the subject, he does not document its presence, but its absence. Herr Geiser can only see himself in the history of the species – but the ‘tear’ remains: between the encyclopaedia entries on the wall and Geiser himself, between the history of an individual that cannot be reconstituted, and the history of the species.<sup>50</sup>

In fact, the cluttering of his wall with paper scraps in the end only increases the uncanny experience of (self-)alienation and the resulting ‘unhomeliness’ [*Unheimlichkeit*] of Geiser’s personal space.

Geiser’s anxieties about losing his memory are ‘ancestral’ fears about ‘dehumanization’ and thus closely connected to the frequent recourse to the motif of the Flood, of the landslide

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Derrida’s deconstructive reading of the archival instinct in “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, trans. Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics* 25.2 (1995): 9-63.

<sup>50</sup> Müller, pp. 83-84.

and erosion more generally, as well as to extinction (of the dinosaurs) and prehistorical times, as Barbara Schmenk explains.<sup>51</sup> The kind of knowledge Geiser is able to extract from the encyclopaedias and nature books in the end actually hasten his 'depersonalization' and further contribute to the 'decontextualization' of his individual subjectivity. As a form of resistance to the process of aging and dementia, the *Zettelwand* is in fact the worst media thinkable, since Geiser tends to misinterpret (and thus wrongly identify with) the 'factual' content of the bribes of information he extracts. In the end he lives in constant fear of becoming (like) the newt he finds in his bathroom and which he ends up seeing as analogous to the extinct dinosaurs. Schmenk, in this context, speaks of the dynamic of 'geologising' and 'anthropologising' potentials in Geiser's process of archivization. As Geiser gradually 'geologises' knowledge through the selection of information about prehistoric life and climatic development, the reader has to take responsibility for a potential (re)anthropologization by providing the kind of coherence the story itself no longer holds.<sup>52</sup> As I would argue, however, it is not so much that Frisch's story opens up the possibility of a reanthropologization of Geiser's situation through the reader – i.e. a neohumanist reading that sees the end of the story as a kind of reassurance, for example in the continuity of nature and the valley that 'survive' Geiser's demise of course – but it also suggests a more permanent 'deanthropocentrism' (i.e. a loss of human memory without return). This 'posthumanist' reading of *Man in the Holocene*, would see Geiser's turn towards geology and the time *before* the human not so much as a strategy of (failed) individual assurance through identification with a longterm view of the (survival of the) species, but as a concrete proposal by Frisch to see the 'geologization' of knowledge as a conscious strategy for 'climate change fiction'.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Pre- and Posthistory, Geology and Ancestrality*

Georg Braungart (following Stephen Jay Gould) refers to the discovery of geological 'deep time' (sometime between 1750 and 1850) as the 'fourth narcissistic wound' of human subjectivity. Alongside the cosmic, biological and psychological 'decentring' of the human, geology adds a temporal marginalization of the human.<sup>54</sup> As anthropology gradually becomes the central discipline, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, leading to an anthropocentric shift within medicine, psychology, rhetoric, natural science and philosophy, Braungart argues, a parallel ascent of geology occurs as the "dark sister of anthropology ... which contains a time bomb for the anthropocentrism of late Enlightenment and the philosophy of the subject of German idealism".<sup>55</sup> He sees Max Frisch's *Holocene* as a late literary fallout from this gradual 'geologization' of human history and what he refers to as a

<sup>51</sup> Barbara Schmenk, "Entropie der Archive: Todesarten in Max Frischs *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*", in Ralph Köhnen and Sebastian Scholz, eds., *Die Medialität des Traumas: Eine Archäologie der Gegenwartskultur*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2006, 175-91.

<sup>52</sup> Schmenk, p. 191.

<sup>53</sup> This line of thought is continued in "Interlude 4: Geology and Deep Time", below.

<sup>54</sup> Georg Braungart, "Apokalypse und Urzeit: Die Entdeckung der Tiefenzeit in der Geologie um 1800 und ihre literarischen Nachbeben", in Ulrich G. Leinsle and Jochen Mecke, eds., *Zeit – Zeitenwechsel – Endzeit: Zeit im Wandel der Zeiten, Kulturen, Techniken und Disziplinen*, Regensburg: Universitätsverlag Regensburg, 2000, pp. 107-20. See also Braungart's more general account of the relationship between literature, the Romantic sublime, geology and anthropology in "Poetic der Nature: Literatur und Geologie", in *Natur – Kultur: Zur Anthropologie von Sprache und Literatur*, ed. Thomas Anz, Paderborn: Mentis, 2009, pp. 57-77. On the topic of (German) literature and geology see also the special issue of *Literatur für Leser* 16.1 (2016), edited by Jason Groves, available online at: [https://www.peterlang.com/fileasset/Journals/LFL012016\\_ebook.pdf](https://www.peterlang.com/fileasset/Journals/LFL012016_ebook.pdf) (accessed 20 December 2020).

<sup>55</sup> Braungart, "Apokalypse und Urzeit", p. 112.

‘transhuman’ perspective: “[Max Frisch’s *Man in the Holocene*] lives off the tension between human egocentrism and a transhuman perspective that the history of the world suggests”.<sup>56</sup>

Braungart returns to *Man in the Holocene* in more detail in a later essay.<sup>57</sup> While it is true that Geiser wonders “whether there would still be a God if there were no longer a human brain, which cannot accept the idea of a creation without creator” (*Man*, 9), Geiser’s obsession with facts is actually driven by the question of a world ‘without’ humans. Since this is an anxiety that works both ‘forwards’ and ‘backwards’ – a time *before* the human and a time *after* – I would prefer to call this aspect of Frisch’s story (and the geological form it takes) a *posthumanist*, rather than a ‘transhuman perspective’ (cf. Baumgart). Geiser’s interest in prehistoric times is mainly a projection of his own annihilation onto the vast timescape before the emergence of the human species. As Geiser realises the impossibility of mastering his own biography – due to his sinking deeper and deeper into dementia – he almost inevitably turns his attention towards the biography of the planet.

The starting point of his interest in prehistory and geology thus lies in his ‘present’ situation: the physical and geographical isolation of his Ticino valley and the incessant rain in the rotten summer he is experiencing, and which is causing his fear of real and imaginary ‘landslides’. The third paragraph of *Holocene* already introduces this theme:

The news in the village is conflicting; some people say there has been no landslide at all, others that an old supporting wall has collapsed, and there is no way of diverting the highway at that spot ... Nobody in the village thinks that the day, or perhaps the night, will come when the whole mountain could begin to slide, burying the village for all time. (*Man*, 3-4)

The environment and the weather, and the rain in particular, initiate Geiser’s obsession with factual, scientific and classificatory knowledge. He begins with a “typology of thunder” (5-6; continued on 24-5) and follows up with a detailed record of rainy periods during one day (41) and with various observations on animals and signs of decay in nature throughout the story. Landslides, floods and erosion push Geiser into seeking reassurance in the ‘encyclopaedic’, the listing of factual knowledge at the same time as he becomes aware of his sinking into dementia: “It is not so much the bad weather – ... What would be bad would be losing one’s memory” (5-6).

Landslides remain a recurrent theme: “A little wall in the lower garden (drystone) has collapsed” (7); it prompts the first facsimile reproduction from one of the books on the history of Ticino: “Chapter 1 Ticino in Prehistoric Times, The First Inhabitants”, which contains this paragraph:

Finally, mention must be made of the many rockfalls that have occurred since the retreat of the glaciers, for they played no little part in giving many districts in the canton of Ticino the appearance they have today. (*Man*, 11)

The “little landslide in the garden” (12) “does not mean that the whole slope is beginning to slide. Presumably, there are rivulets here and there and lumps of clay, these are usual in persistent rain. Presumably ...” (13). What is half meant as (self-)reassurance, nevertheless continues to grow into a general feeling of apocalypse, deluge, climate cataclysm and catastrophes.

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>57</sup> Georg Braungart, “‘Katastrophen kennt allein der Mensch, sofern er sie überlebt’: Max Frisch, Peter Handke und die Geologie”, In *Figurationen der literarischen Moderne*, eds. Carsten Dutt and Roman Luckscheiter, (Heidelberg: Winter, 2007), 23-41.

Even though “Geiser does not believe in the Flood”, he nevertheless, in Noah-like fashion, goes about ‘counting’ and describing the animals of the valley, even the extinct ones (the encyclopaedia entries on dinosaurs keep multiplying). He also implicitly compares himself to the explorer Robert Scott (the diary of Captain Scott is one of the books in Geiser’s library listed on p. 10). “Landslides like that have always occurred in this district” (29); “Nobody is reckoning on another Flood” (31); “More serious than the collapse of a dry-stone wall would be a crack across the ground, narrow at first, no broader than a hand, but a crack” (32); “A crack from gray prehistoric ages ... at no time within human memory has a village in this valley been overwhelmed, and in a place where rocks once fell, burying some farm buildings, no new building was ever erected” (33); “Erosion is a slow process” (48); “There have been some landslides; not here, but farther up the valley” (54); “There have been some landslides” (57); “there have been some landslides” (95); “A crack in the plaster, fine as hair, which was not there yesterday” (95); “There have been some landslides” (105) – as the story and Geiser’s demise thus progress, cracks and landslides increasingly come to represent Geiser’s loss of memory and control.

In fact, nonhuman ‘objects’ and phenomena increasingly develop an agency of their own and guide Geiser’s interest and the selection of paper cuttings.<sup>58</sup> Rossbacher speaks of “Frisch’s calculated geologizations of human life” in this context and lists the ‘petrifications’ that befall Geiser himself:

‘Geologization’ of man in Frisch’s analogical technique means: short term memory is that layer of the human that corresponds to the latest stratum of earth history. It is that layer which constitutes the surface and is thus most exposed to erosion. Deeper layers, longterm memory, are what remains because they are unexposed. Erosion in the brain is thus ablation and elution of the person. Paleontology corresponds to the archaeology of memory; Geiser’s work of knowledge, recalling and (re)storing of world historical knowledge on paper slips and walls is supposed to counter the biological process of personality erosion which cannot be influenced. The analogy is retained until the end: Geiser’s stroke is a ruptured brain artery, which corresponds to the crack in the rock of the valley.<sup>59</sup>

The narcissistic wound that geology’s deep time inflicts affects Geiser at a personal as well as at a species level (i.e. at the level of (his) ‘humanity’). Immediately after the sentence “Geiser has no desire for sleep; a person does not have all that much time”, follows an encyclopaedia entry on ‘geology’:

Geology is a science devoted to tracing the development of the earth through its various eras since the formation of the earth’s crust, and it covers a period of 2,000 million years – according to recent discoveries, 5,000 million years (see Geological Eras). ... In this process [i.e. the evolution of higher forms of life] the changing pattern of the earth has played an important role, making it imperative for plants and animals to adapt to new living conditions, to migrate or to die out. (*Man*, 68-69)

Geology and rock formation in particular represent a form of nonhuman agency *par excellence*, which means that the analogy between the erosion of Geiser’s brain and the climatic erosion in Geiser’s valley suggests a link between the fate of Geiser, the individual

<sup>58</sup> This aspect corresponds to what Lowell Duckert writes in connection with the ‘agency’ of rain: “rain assembles (non)human collectives and hurls them across space and time. Rain *precipitates* in the literal sense: it actively ‘throws’ things ‘headlong’ and ‘causes’ things ‘to happen’”. See Lowell Duckert, “When It Rains”, In *Material Ecocriticism*, eds. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 116.

<sup>59</sup> Rossbacher, p. 258.



human, and the fate of the human species as such. In creating an analogy between Geiser's dementia and prehistoric times, a forgetting 'before' the human so to speak, or the human that Geiser (and, arguably, humanity) is 'about to forget', the story opens up the possibility for the reader to perceive what Kathryn Yusoff has called the 'geological life' of the human in the Anthropocene.<sup>60</sup>

The encyclopaedia entry on erosion at the end of the story, when Geiser has suffered his stroke and is found dying by his daughter, is the first in a series of final paper cuttings on themes like 'Chestnut' and 'Chestnut Canker' (also a recurrent theme in the story), 'Eschatology' ("Theology of 'last things', i.e., the final fate of the individual human being and of the world"), 'Coherent' and 'Apoplexy': "Geological erosion, or abrasion, is, in its natural occurrence, a beneficial process, though human interference and mismanagement can lead to catastrophes, caused by disturbing the natural balance ..." (*Man*, 107). Geiser lists the geological eras in a handwritten note on p. 19, immediately after a cutting from a typescript entry on dinosaurs and the Triassic, prompted by the reflection: "When did man first emerge, and why?" (18). At the end of this cutting is the statement that leads to the central (deliberate) 'confusion' in the title of the story: "According to present views, man first made his appearance in the Pleistocene (see Old Stone Age); the geological present is termed the Holocene ..." (19). This 'fact' is then reversed during Geiser's mountain escape and which brings on the stroke, when he says "man emerged in the Holocene" (79), and which, in turn, follows arguably the most memorable (because almost desperately anthropocentric) phrase from Frisch's story: "only human beings can recognize catastrophes, provided they survive them; Nature recognizes no catastrophes" (79). The confusion about the Holocene, however, is ultimately dismissed in Geiser's last thoughts: "Who cares about the Holocene? Nature needs no names. Geiser knows that. The rocks do not need his memory" (107). A trace of the confusion remains, however – if it really is a confusion – since "Human beings are the only living creatures with an awareness of history" (40), as one of Geiser's early handwritten notes states.

A number of interpretations are possible here: Geiser simply gets confused through the wealth of scientific knowledge and facts – a sign that his and, by analogy, the species's (historical) memory is fading. Another possibility – already hinted at above – depends on what we might understand by 'man' (i.e. when does the human *begin*) – *homo sapiens*, or *homo faber*, or *homo sapiens sapiens* – in which case one would be stressing the continued evolution of the human within the last two (and today, arguably, three) geological strata, namely from the Pleistocene to the Holocene to the Anthropocene. But a third possible interpretation, closer to my argument about the ambivalence of the 'after' or 'post' and the 'proto' or 'before', would run like this: prehistory – and the Pleistocene in particular – remains 'with us' in many ways; or, in other words, the Stone Age retains a ghostly presence. As with any transition from one age to another, the arbitrariness of naming and drawing a

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<sup>60</sup> See Kathryn Yusoff, "Geologic life: prehistory, climate, futures in the Anthropocene", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31 (2013): 779-795:

'geologic life' – a mineralogical dimension of human composition that remains currently undertheorised in social thought and is directly relevant for the material, temporal, and corporeal conceptualization of fossil fuels. Examining fossils as material and discursive knots in the narrative arc of human becoming, I argue for a 'geological turn' that takes seriously not just our biological (or biopolitical) life, but our geological (or geopolitical = life, as crucial to modes of subjectification in the Anthropocene. (p. 780).

For further comments on the idea of a 'geologic turn' see "Interlude 4: Geology and Deep Time", below.

line becomes apparent and demonstrates the 'constructedness' of any teleology. Just as a certain human 'appears' only in the Holocene (namely that creature that records and tries to understand its own history in the context of (deep) time), a certain distinction between Pleistocene and Holocene (and, indeed, Anthropocene) only 'appears' with the human – which reveals the anthropocentrism of a discursive knowledge formation even as apparently nonanthropocentric as geology.

It is therefore no coincidence that 'man' should remain at the centre of Frisch's story, literally. As Probst notes:

Under the heading 'Mensch' [man or human being], the narrator reproduces verbatim from the Brockhaus encyclopaedia passages dealing with man's ability to see himself as a subject in relation to an objective world (the *conditio sine qua non* for the text we are reading); man's attempt better to understand himself through divine beings, totems, spirits, or other alter egos; the extreme materialist view of man as a machine; man as a historical being shaped through traditions in the crafts, sciences, arts, morals, laws, and values; the difference between man and animal as to man's freer but at the same time problematic relation to his environment, characterized by his ability to project into the future ('man has a future'). The fact that this article on 'Mensch' appears exactly in the middle of *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* [i.e. *Man*, 53-54], especially with the quotation concerning the future of man, can hardly be accidental and must be interpreted as an ironical implicit reference to an anthropocentric world view, to the title of the narrative, and to man's questionable chances of survival ...<sup>61</sup>

It thus seems that Frisch, by deliberately placing the received knowledge of anthropocentrism at the centre of his story and by almost clinically undoing every aspect of it through the symptomatic and symbolic demise of his main character, would turn *Man in the Holocene* into a proto-posthumanist fiction of a world 'without' humans, both in the sense of *before* and *after* the human.

At least two further aspects of such a postanthropocentric or posthumanist reading of *Man in the Holocene* that stand in connection with 'geologization' should be mentioned here: the 'language of stone' and the role of (post)animality in Frisch's story. These are connected to geology through Geiser's interest in the Ice Age, and the Flood, respectively.

Geiser's handwritten note on page 24 starts with "At the end of the ice age the level of the sea was at least 100 meters lower than today". The typescript cuttings on page 36 and 37 refer to "The glaciers of the Ice Age", which "transformed these mountain ranges by acting on peaks and valleys according to new principles" and to the "Diluvian (see Ice Age)", as well as to the "diluvian ice sheet". Elsewhere he notes: "The glaciers, which once stretched as far as Milan, are now in retreat everywhere" (*Man*, 42), and in the "green valley" in which Geiser lives "one can see moraine, debris from the huge glaciers of the Ice Age ... pebbles and gravel from the Ice Age" (43). "The glaciers have been retreating for centuries" (47), however, it is during his trip to Iceland some thirty years earlier, that Geiser develops his interest in geology, the Ice Age, and one could argue, a certain 'geophilia'. It is precisely the prehistoric aspect of the Icelandic landscape that captures him: "The wheel tracks left in the gravel or mud by one's own vehicle provide the only sign that there are people on our planet" (51), "No farm, not even an abandoned one, nowhere the works of man ... A world *before* the creation of man" (52; my italics). Geiser's elemental 'geophilia', or the love of stone, as Jeffrey Cohen explains, "exists outside human experience. Yet to us nonlithics, its force will be most evident in the relations that enmesh us over long scales of time and in the

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<sup>61</sup> Gerhard F. Probst, "The Old Man and the Rain: *Man in the Holocene*", In *Perspectives on Max Frisch*, eds. Probst and Jay F. Bodine, (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1982), 174 (note 5).

‘storied matter’ these confederations of the human and inhuman divulge”.<sup>62</sup> As a “stumbling block to anthropocentrism”, stone is also a “spur to ceaseless story”, as Cohen writes.<sup>63</sup> And it is Geiser’s fascination with the “memory of rocks” (*Man*, 107) and the awareness that they preceded and will outlast him (and his species), as well as the fact that the rocks “do not need his memory”, that shapes what appears to be his final resignation or acceptance of his individual fate. There seems to be something soothing (‘transindividual’ or even ‘inhuman’) in the repetition of the initial description of Geiser’s Ticino valley that closes the story. On this second occasion, however, it is also an eerie scene, a scene (almost) ‘without’ humans: “All in all, a green valley, wooded as in the Stone Age” (111).<sup>64</sup> It is the continuity of stone, geology and deep time and its strange ‘inhuman’ quality which now calls for the construction of a ‘witness’ position *outside* the human (individual and species), or, as Jan Zalasiewicz writes, it allows ‘us’ to see “the planet in a pebble”.<sup>65</sup>

The other aspect of ‘geologization’, one might even say, Geiser’s own ‘fossilization’, can be seen in his relation to animals, both living and extinct. Throughout the story Geiser is a keen observer of animals, who (just like stone and plants) are part of the ‘semiotics’ of climate change, decay, deluge and catastrophe that is being invoked by the story. Geiser wonders “what bees do in a summer like this” (*Man*, 7); he remembers a day of “biting flies, lizards, butterflies, summer as usual” (17); on his way to the rainy village he sees “three drenched sheep” (30); in one of his handwritten notes he puts “Fish do not sleep” (40), which acts as a mirror of his own sleeplessness. He gives a first ‘Genesis-like’ description of his valley (which is taken up again at the very end, pp. 110-111) by noting: “There are snakes, grass snakes, which are harmless, and various kinds of vipers, among them asps ... The valley is swarming with lizards ... Cows are few and far between; since the slopes are too steep, it is more a valley of sheep and goats and hens” (45). Geiser also talks about woodpeckers (49), a little owl (50), and a stray dog (97-98). In the context of the frequent references to the Flood, the Ark and Genesis, Geiser thus becomes a Noah figure, albeit a Noah or a human ‘shepherd’ whose dominion turns into disaster.

One of Geiser’s early cuttings are from Genesis 17-24, which announces the apocalypse of both (post)humanity and (post)animality:<sup>66</sup> “And all flesh died that moved upon the earth,

<sup>62</sup> Jeffrey Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 19-20.

<sup>63</sup> Cohen, p. 6. See also the link Cohen makes between the experience of an “alien duration” through the touching of stone (p. 80) and the potential for an “ecological project of thinking beyond anthropocentricity” this might provide (p. 9).

<sup>64</sup> Leonie Silber refers to this scene as a “posthuman idyll”; cf. her “‘Die Gesteine brauchen sein Gedächtnis nicht’. Über die Erosion von Berg, Selbst und Erinnerung bei Max Frisch und Brigitte Kronauer”, In *Das Erschreiben der Berge: Die Alpen in der deutschsprachigen Literatur*, ed. Johann Georg Lughofer, (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2014), 227.

<sup>65</sup> This is the title of one of Zalasiewicz’s books, *The Planet in a Pebble: A Journey into Earth’s Deep History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); see also his *The Earth After Us: What Legacy Will Humans Leave in the Rocks?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and, co-authored with Mark Williams, *The Goldilocks Planet: The Four Billion Year Story of Earth’s Climate*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>66</sup> I am here taking up the interesting use of the term ‘postanimality’ by the editors of a special *Yale French Studies* issue (127 (2015)) on “Animots” (a reference to Derrida’s coignage based on the French homophony between *animaux* (animals) and *mot* (words)). The editors understand the condition of being ‘postanimal’, together with the question of “What does ‘to be after’ mean”, in three senses: “(1) The human comes after, is derived from, and follows the animal, not only as evolution tells this story, but in non-linear and recursive modes that unsettle the narrative form itself ...; (2) The traditional concept of the animal, like that of the human, is obsolete, ideological, and oppressive. Postanimals could be those freed from the conceptual and bodily restraints of

both of fowl, and of cattle, and of beast, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and every man" (*Man*, 16). This theme is taken up again by Geiser when he remarks during his escape attempt through the mountains while he is "crawling on all fours": "No cattle – No birds – Not a sound ..." (74), which, in turn, leads to a reversal of man's dominion over the animals, one could argue – which represents another form of 'postanimality' – when Geiser concludes his description of 'prehistoric' Iceland by saying: "Probably the fish will outlive us, and the birds" (53). Even more significantly, this 'posthuman' statement comes just before the central encyclopaedia cutting of 'Man' (see above). It is when Geiser or the narrator comments, in what looks like an aside, that he has "roasted the cat" (97), Kitty, that the idea of human dominion of the animal is entirely undone. It is, arguably, also this act that ultimately confirms Geiser's by now 'pathological' state to the reader:

Since yesterday, when he roasted the cat over the fire and then was unable to eat it, Geiser can no longer face even the soup, because there is bacon in it. ... Kitty is buried near the roses. (97)<sup>67</sup>

His most vivid interest, however, congruent with his geophilia, lies in 'prehistoric' (esp. fossilised) animals and their descendants: dinosaurs, lizards and ants. These 'monsters' trigger a peculiar kind of empathy and identification within Geiser during his gradual realization that he himself is turning into some monstrous 'other'. The first dinosaurs appear in a cutting on page 18 prompted by the question "When did man first emerge, and why?" The central analogy, however, is established on p. 61 when the spotted salamander he finds in his bath tub, seen through the magnifying glass, "looks like a monster: a dinosaur" with an "awful dullness in all limbs". This prompts almost five pages of consecutive encyclopaedia cuttings on 'Salamander', 'Newt', 'Salamandridae', 'Amphibia', 'The Era of the dinosaurs' and several dinosaur species. One of these entries also introduces the important theme of 'metamorphosis' (*Man*, 62).

Despite the factual negation – "Whether the spotted alpine salamanders of today can be regarded as the successors of dinosaurs or as an early form of them is not clear from the encyclopaedia" (62) – in Geiser's mind, the salamander, the dinosaurs and himself from then on become eminently 'confusable'. Looking at his 'paper gallery' and prompted by another passage from Genesis, Geiser indulges into another knowledge frenzy on dinosaurs on pp. 86-92, with consecutive cuttings with illustrations. The scene gives way to what looks like Geiser recovering from a fall: "He is just feeling dizzy, which is why he has to wait a while before venturing to rise to his feet like a human being" (92). This further confirms the idea of 'postanimality', one might argue: Geiser's realization of his slipping in and out of 'animality' and 'humanity' – a process that is anticipated by the metamorphosis theme, as early as page 24, in the form of a handwritten note: "Changing of human beings into animals, trees, stone, etc., See: metamorphosis" (reproduced almost verbatim on page 56). When Geiser's deterioration accelerates towards the final stroke and his thoughts become ever more confused and incoherent, he uses the comparison between him and the 'newt' as an ultimate, albeit unsuccessful, attempt of reassuring himself of his 'humanness':

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metaphysics and technology; (3) The apocalyptic version of the postanimal would be the *last* animal ...". See Matthew Senior, David L. Clark, and Carla Freccero, "Editors' Preface: *Ecce animot*: Postanimality from Cave to Screen", *Yale French Studies* 127 (2015): 8. Geiser's own 'zoography' – his description of his valley's fauna (and flora), I would argue, reveals traits of senses 1 and 3 of 'postanimality' in particular.

<sup>67</sup> An ironic premonition of this scene is given in the statement "The cats in this district are seldom eaten", on p. 28. Early signs of Geiser's dislike, maybe even jealousy of his cat can be seen on p. 59: "Cats always fall on their feet, but in spite of that she is now yowling outside the front door ...".

When Geiser looks in the mirror again to see his face, he knows the name of his daughter in Basel is Corinne, and that the firm in Basel that his son-in-law has been managing, and which has since trebled its output, bears his name, even if Geiser does look like a newt. (96)

Even after throwing the spotted salamander into the fire (96) he keeps being haunted by it even in his final 'anthropocentric' convulsions:

Geiser knows the year of his birth and the first names of his parents and the first names of his parents, also his mother's maiden name, and the name of the street in Basel in which he was born, the number of the house – (The things a newt knows.) Geiser is not a newt ... Geiser knows what he looks like. (A newt doesn't even know that.) (96-98)

Newt or not, Geiser's resistance to 'dehumanization' ends with the already cited realization that neither the ants, nor the dinosaurs, nor the rocks "need his memory" (107). The question a posthumanist reading of *Man in the Holocene* might thus raise is whether to understand Geiser's metamorphosis merely as a process of regression, senility and dementia, or, instead, maybe also as a chance, namely of an opening towards a geo-ecological longterm memory for the Anthropocene that is both transindividual and transspecies.<sup>68</sup>

#### *Before Humanity: Dementia and Ecography*

How, then, to read and do justice to Geiser's story given its multiple stakes: the personal tragedy of his dementia, the extinction threat to the species, the future of knowledge, the effects of anthropogenic climate change, and the role of 'geological' memory? It seems entirely justified, in my view, to include Frisch's story as an important contribution to an emerging canon of (critical) proto-posthumanism. Geiser's feeling of "cosmic solitude",<sup>69</sup> in fact, moves Frisch's story within reach of 'last man' narratives. It would be wrong, however, I believe, to see *Man in the Holocene* as a (still) fundamentally (too) humanist text in the sense of an existentialist 'drama', in a Camusian vein of tragic absurdity, or a form of literary 'gerontology' (i.e. a coping strategy for dementia). To be sure, in phrases like "brain cells are ceasing to function" (*Man*, 32) and "One is becoming stupid ..." (24) Geiser does project his own dying process onto that of humanity and 'civilization' as a whole. It is also true that the return of the almost humanless natural idyll of the valley, which will outlive Geiser, does inevitably (also) carry an elegiac tone that is so characteristic of a certain kind of humanist 'yearning' for the human, its essence and its survival. However, focusing entirely on these aspects of humanist closure and a possible reaffirmation of the human in the face of the inhuman would be forgetting some other important aspects. As a human, Geiser is about to forget (who or what he is). The human being about to forget also bears another meaning, however: the human is about forgetting – in order to be human one needs to be able to forget, especially to forget what or who what one was *before*. Geiser's stroke and his creeping aphasia (cf. the last encyclopaedia cutting on 'Apoplexy' which refers to the 'loss of speech' that often accompanies a stroke; p. 109) are thus not just a metaphorical testimony to his gradual loss of memory, loss of life, loss of humanity, etc., but it must also be taken

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<sup>68</sup> This is in effect the question of how to interpret the final scene of the 'posthuman idyll', namely either as a posthuman 'renaturalization' or, on the contrary, its refusal; on this point see also Bruce Clarke's, *Posthuman Metamorphosis: Narrative and Systems*, New York: Fordham, 2008, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Butler's phrase, in "Die Dämonen an die Wand malen – Zu Max Frischs Spätwerk: *Triptychon* und *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*", *Text & Kritik* 47/48 (1983): 100.

*literally*, in the sense of an example of writing or literature (or maybe even a ‘world’) *without* humans.<sup>70</sup> It is once more Günter Grass who describes such a literature ‘after the apocalypse’, in his Feltrinelli-Prize speech (1982), by speaking of his own attempt at postapocalyptic writing:

I know, however, that this book I am intending to write can no longer pretend as if it was certain to have a future. The farewell to the damaged things, to the stricken creature, of us and our heads, who have imagined everything and its end, would have to be written as well. ... Progress is a snail. ... The snail is too fast. It has already overtaken us. But we, fallen out of nature, we, the enemies of nature, still believe that we are ahead of the snail. ... But in my perplexity I know nevertheless that future will only be again possible when we find an answer and act in a way that we owe as guests to nature and this planet, by no longer propagating and instead taking away fear, by disarming down to the level of nakedness.<sup>71</sup>

Of course, writing *before* just as much as writing *after* the human in a literary and in a literal sense remain mere conjecture. Nevertheless, one can say that Frisch’s story gives it a very good go in critically foregrounding and questioning literary anthropocentrism.<sup>72</sup>

Geiser’s Iceland trip has opened up the idea of “A world before the creation of man” (*Man*, 52) for him and in his ‘cosmic’ and almost ‘prehistoric’ isolation he speculates that “probably there are whole Milky Ways without a trace of brain matter” (68). In moments like these, *Man in the Holocene* opens up a reading of the problem of ‘ancestrality’, and, from the point of view of contemporary ecological ethics, the possibility of new ‘ecographical’ ways of writing, which, in Geiser’s case, would be a writing and a memory of “stones, ants and dinosaurs”. Geiser’s own ‘fossilization’ and its projection onto a time after humans, as well as his retrojection onto a time before them, from a ‘scientific’ point of view, opens out to what Quentin Meillassoux refers to as the ‘arche-fossil’<sup>73</sup> – or that which cannot be understood by ‘correlationism’. What for Meillassoux constitutes ‘after’ finitude, however, is also based on an unimaginable ‘before’, which is analogous to what I have been projecting onto the phrase *before humanity*. In fact, Meillassoux’s question is also Geiser’s, or Frisch’s: how to accept the fact that there is a reality ‘outside’ any human subjectivity or experience that can, nevertheless, be scientifically proven, and which is older than any possibility of any ‘witnessing’; a pre-history in the literal and radically pre- or non-anthropocentric sense? Meillassoux’s target is post-Kantian ‘correlationism’ or “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other”, which “consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another”.<sup>74</sup> Meillassoux’s struggle against the limits of correlationalism is indeed similar to Geiser’s (and

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Alan Weisman’s thought experiment *The World Without Us*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007). For a critique of ‘world-without-us’ scenarios see Brent Bellamy and Imre Szeman, “Life after People: Science Fiction and Ecological Future”, In *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, eds. Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 192-205.

<sup>71</sup> Grass, “Die Vernichtung der Menschheit hat begonnen”, p. 832-33.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Sophie Bunge, who reads *Man in the Holocene* through the lens of Kantian philosophical anthropology and (somewhat problematically) sees it as an example of a “liberation of the subject from the constraints of anthropocentric modernity, as an affirmation of life, which seeks refuge in the finality of the human and in the tears of its sovereignty”; Bunge, “‘Der Mensch bleibt ein Laie’ – (Post)Kantianische Auseinandersetzungen in Max Frischs *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*”, *Text & Kritik* 47/48 (2013): 162-71 (169).

<sup>73</sup> See my extensive discussion of Meillassoux in the “Preamble” and “Introduction: Before...”, above.

<sup>74</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, (London: Continuum, 2008), 5.

posthumanism's) attempt to think the world 'without' (i.e. before *and* after) humans and without himself. Geiser tries to recover, both mentally, as well as literally and 'geologically', the 'great outdoors' that, according to Meillassoux, contemporary philosophers have lost: "that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not ...".<sup>75</sup> In fact, Meillassoux's argument is also, strictly speaking, a 'geological' one. His scientific notion of ancestrality is concerned with the dates of the universe, the accretion of the earth, the origin of life and the origin of humankind on earth, which raises the (philosophical) question: "what is it exactly that astrophysicists, geologists, or palaeontologists are talking about when they discuss the age of the universe, the date of the accretion of the earth, the date of the appearance of pre-human species, or the date of the emergence of humanity itself?"<sup>76</sup> The challenge – for a correlationist, or maybe for any anthropocentric and humanist point of view – to interpret a statement like "Y occurred before the emergence of human beings" lies in addressing the tacit "codicil of modernity", as Meillassoux calls it, which always feels compelled to add to this constructed 'nonhuman' perspective a 'for humans' (and in the case of a scientific statement, 'according to' or 'for the human scientist').<sup>77</sup> The notion of 'before the human' thus always, necessarily, risks remaining a conjecture *of* or *by* the human, which, ultimately, constitutes a denial of true 'ancestrality' as such. Or, as Meillassoux continues, the before, in a correlationist sense, is always "a retrojection of the past on the basis of the present", only ever a retrojection of an ancestral past.<sup>78</sup> Thus, just like the narrative of *Man in the Holocene*, Meillassoux's account of 'after finitude' and 'ancestrality', in the end, almost inevitably, have to give way to some 'posthuman idyll' in which a world without humans produces an all too humanist elegy:

The arche-fossil enjoins us to track thought inviting us to discover the 'hidden passage' trodden by the latter in order to achieve what modern philosophy has been telling us for the past two centuries is impossibility itself: *to get out of ourselves*, to grasp the in-itself, to know what is whether we are or not.<sup>79</sup>

On the other side of the arche-fossil, thus still lies the catastrophe of forgetting. As 'man', the 'anthropos', is about to forget 'himself', by writing himself out of the picture, or by suffering progressive dementia and aphasia, precisely at a time when anthropogenic climate change risks bringing about a *planetary* destruction of (human and nonhuman life, individuals and species), Frisch's desperately humane remainder and reminder maybe lies in a call to remember the fact that the task of humans – even, or maybe even more so, in a postanthropocentric world – is that of remembering, and of working through the initial human repression of the inhuman. This is what Frisch seems to allude to in an entry to his posthumously published *Entwürfe zu einem dritten Tagebuch*:

One might assume that someone who knows due to a medical diagnosis or old age that he will soon have to go might remain unaffected by the Holocaust-prognosis, APRES NOUS LE DELUGE – the opposite is the case; the idea that there won't be any humans after us, annihilates retroactively our lived past.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Meillassoux, p. 7.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26 (original emphasis).

<sup>80</sup> Max Frisch, *Entwürfe zu einem dritten Tagebuch*, ed. Peter von Matt, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2010), 57.