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Sirens without Us: The Future after Humanity

Robert Rushing

I'll begin with three quick, recent examples of a radical way of thinking about the future: that it might not be there at all. In *No Future*, Lee Edelman offers a political and ethical provocation: he argues that all political thought up until now has been governed by "reproductive futurism" (2004, 2), one that assumes that the measure and valuation of every act is how it benefits an imagined future, the next generation. Edelman dares his readers to imagine a politics and an ethics that are not posited on the invisible ground of the future. The impetus for this provocation is Edelman's commitment to a radical queer politics, one that is not predicated on an unspoken (and hence universalized) allegiance to reproduction. In particular, Edelman ties the imagination of "no future" to the question of enjoyment. "Queerness," he writes, "is...a matter...of *embodying* a remainder of the Real.... One name for this unnameable remainder...is *jouissance*, sometimes translated as 'enjoyment'" (2004, 25). The negativity (in the sense of its power to negate) of enjoyment is a staple of Lacanian thinking, and another term for it is the death drive—for Edelman, this disturbing excess of the Real (queerness) is also the death drive, a reminder that within the subject is something that longs for no future, just as the "queer" may be what perturbs the social field by imagining a politics without reproductive futurism.

In 2007, Alan Weisman published a book entitled *The World without Us*, in which the author examines what would happen to the Earth if all human life were to vanish overnight. How long would it take for our houses to collapse, our skyscrapers to fall, or our interstate highways to disappear? Weisman's book aims at portraying the slow disappearance not of humanity, but of human traces. How long would it take before nothing would be visible to an imaginary alien zooming overhead? How long until the last traces would no longer be discoverable by anyone? *The World without Us* was a thought-experiment, one that emphasized a kind of dramatic realism, one that aimed to illustrate (with a rather broad nod toward catastrophe movies) just how and when the Golden Gate Bridge would collapse and the Manhattan subway would flood with the waters of the Hudson. While Weisman makes one or two gestures toward issues like overpopulation and climate change, it's fairly clear that his book is designed primarily to thrill with its series of images seemingly drawn from post-apocalyptic films, but scientifically plausible. Although Weisman's book is intellectually slender (Robert Braille in the *Boston Globe* called it "gratuitous" and "wispy"), it shares something remarkable in common with Edelman—it assumes (albeit tacitly) that imagining our own end is a form of *enjoyment*, and the book's popularity indicates that many agree. Tellingly, Weisman's "last traces" of humanity are our radio and television broadcasts diffusing away from our planet, our own enjoyments that will keep spreading throughout the universe long after we are gone.

For rather different reasons, in 2009's *New Italian Epic* the Italian collective Wu Ming has also suggested writing and thinking about literature that does not necessarily

presume a future for humanity.¹ For Wu Ming the issue is, however, also political: like Edelman, they note that essentially all of our thinking about the future has been narcissistic, predicated on the assumption of our own survival.

Ci rifiutiamo di ammettere che andiamo incontro all'estinzione come specie. Certamente non nei prossimi giorni, e nemmeno nei prossimi anni, ma avverrà, avverrà in un futuro che è intollerabile immaginare, perché sarà *senza di noi*. È doloroso pensare che tutto quanto abbiamo costruito nelle nostre vite e...in secoli di civiltà ammonterà a niente perché tutto diviene polvere.... Altre specie umane si sono estinte prima di noi, verrà anche il nostro momento (Wu Ming 2009, 56)

(We refuse to admit that we're heading towards extinction as a species. Certainly not in the next few days, not even in the next few years, but it will happen, it will happen in a future that is unbearable to imagine, because it will be *without us*. It's painful to think that everything we've built in our lives and...in centuries of civilization will amount to nothing, because it will all become dust.... Other human species have gone extinct before us, and our time, too, will come).²

Wu Ming is not being at all alarmist here—they are only taking the long view. The very long view: what they have in mind is a time frame not of years, decades, centuries or even millennia, but rather Darwinian time, geological time, astrophysical time. This is the kind of futurity that gives rise to a recognition of a paradoxical “no future.” No matter how enduring our species and our civilization may be, the truly long run is that millions of years will almost certainly witness humans becoming something that is no longer human, and an extinction of the “Old Ones” (i.e., us). If not, the sun will turn into a red giant and go supernova in a few billion years, and if somehow that would not be enough, an even longer span of time will witness the extinction of all the stars in the universe, and a gradual “heat death,” in which the universe will cool to within a fraction of a degree above absolute zero.³ Such a future (or lack thereof) is unbearable, yes, but it is also absolutely certain that it will come to pass. The task for the writer then becomes that of imagining a world without us, seen by another. “Diverrà sempre più importante—come aveva intuito Calvino—la ‘resa’ letteraria di sguardi extra-umani, non-umani, non identificabili” (Wu Ming 2009, 58; it will become increasingly important—as Calvino had guessed—to render in literature those gazes that are extra-human, inhuman,

¹ [Editors' note: a number of pieces in this collection consider the Wu Ming phenomenon. See especially Fulginiti and Vito, “The New Italian Epic”; Vito, “Conversazione con Wu Ming1; as well as the “Introduction” to the issue as a whole.]

² All translations mine.

³ Science offers a bewildering variety of possible endings to the universe, including the “Big Crunch,” the “Big Freeze,” the “Big Rip” and the “Big Whimper” (astonishingly, none of them are nicknamed the “Big Sleep”). The heat death I describe above is nicknamed the “Big Whimper.” For a review of a wide variety of different endings (from the end of life to the end of the universe), see *Scientific American* 2010.

unidentifiable). Such experiments, Wu Ming suggest, have the power to help us emerge from a strictly anthropomorphic line of thought, and towards “un pensiero *ecocritico*” (59; an *ecocritical* way of thinking [emphasis in original]).

Within Wu Ming’s call for a literary exploration of Darwinian time is an implied critique that is structurally analogous to Edelman’s: when we lay a claim to the future, we are implicitly laying a claim to a special status for ourselves. For Edelman, futurity privileges the heterosexual “breeder,” who projects him- or herself into an imagined future, along with a certain heteronormativity. For Wu Ming, futurity also assumes a privileged place for the human (and in a certain sense, a privileged place for life itself). What would our politics and ethics look like if we assumed as a starting place the non-continuity of humanity? For Wu Ming, this is essentially work for the imagination, and hence a task for literature, but most importantly, an ethical act. It is altruism, of course: de-centering ourselves from a special place at the center of the cosmos. Its first step would be to imagine the future without us, or to imagine our own ending.

But how to imagine this futurity? Wu Ming cites Calvino as a precursor to this inhuman future, as a writer who frequently turned to narrators and characters who were “extra-human, inhuman or unidentifiable.” Evidently, they are thinking of Calvino’s “cosmicomic” stories of the 1960s, which feature a completely unidentifiable narrator, who by turns appears to be a star, an elementary particle, a field of force, a shell, a dinosaur, a bird, a fish, and even occasionally a human being. Or perhaps they are also thinking of Agilulfo from *Il cavaliere inesistente* (1959 [*The Nonexistent Knight*, 1962]), the Renaissance knight who did not actually exist, but was merely a suit of armor animated by pure will and a dash of obsessive-compulsive disorder. But Calvino’s putatively inhuman characters are of course human, more human than his human characters, in fact. Part of Calvino’s playful game in the cosmicomic stories (no less in *I nostri antenati* [*Our Ancestors*]) is to present these unusual actors in their unusual places (before the Big Bang, inside a black hole, and so on), but as immediately recognizable human types, filled with petty jealousies, bad manners, cantankerousness, sexual desire, and all the rest. They are, in short, *personified*.

Which brings us to Paul De Man, and the question of giving a voice to the dead. De Man is also interested in the inhuman gaze—specifically, the inhuman gaze of a celestial object (perhaps he was reading Calvino...). In “Autobiography as De-facement,” De Man turns to the figure of the sun in a Wordsworth poem, a sun that gazes, that sees, that bears witness to a speech that endures beyond death. He identifies this as “the figure of prosopopeia, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech” (1979, 926). Elsewhere in that same essay, he calls prosopopeia “the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave” (ibid., 927), and tightly links it to an autobiographical mode of writing. This is extremely suggestive for our considerations of an attempt to narrate our own absence, the future without us. It suggests, for instance, that this desire may not be so anti-anthropocentric after all, but is perhaps simply a concealed way of re-inscribing our own narcissism, a way of giving our own faces to the alien objects of the future. The world without us may turn out to be just our own story once again, written larger. For Wu Ming, imagining an “epic futurity” (of the truly *longue durée* that implicates the disappearance of humanity) necessarily comports an ecocritical dimension. (If we’re going to vanish someday, then there’s surely nothing special about us that justifies our

devouring of the planet's resources...) But without doubt this de-centering move, relocating humanity to a trivial and marginal space in the history of the universe, carries a necessary prosopopeia: in order to imagine our own death, we must project our own gaze and voice into the future space we had just evacuated of our contaminating presence. To imagine any future at all is to imagine our own human gaze, masochistically lonely, surviving the apocalypse.

"Death," De Man asserts, "is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament" (1979, 930). After all, in writing ourselves out of the picture, we must do so through recourse to figurative language, a language that, for De Man, allows us to imagine at the expense of having the real thing. The future without us that Wu Ming point to is a future utterly without human voice or gaze; to imagine our own absence is to see and hear nothing, because we are not there. Prosopopeia specifically (and figurative language more generally) is the price we pay for admission to the spectacle of the universe after we no longer exist—but it is a spectacle formed wholly out of us. The dead can speak, but only insofar as we ventriloquize them; the apparently neutral or even universal ecocritical thought elicited by Wu Ming's inhumanly long future is *our own value*, an anticipated nostalgia for what good stewards we humans were back when we were still around. More precisely, the "exterior" and impartial ecocritical value that Wu Ming find in our absence is *their* value—one I share, to be sure, but still recognizable as a particular political-ethical belief.⁴ After all, the Earth could care less what abuses we perpetrate upon it, unless we fantasize our own consciousness in it, personify *her* (and give *her* a sex and a gender), place a mask on her face (was it a face at all, before we personified it?) that suspiciously resembles our own features. One might extend this pitiless argument further—since if in the truly long term, absolutely *everything* will turn into a frozen, unchanging soup, then there is absolutely no reason *not* to exploit the planet mercilessly. There is, after all, ultimately no future for us or the planet, or even life itself, so what difference will our careful stewardship make over the truly long term? *Carpe diem* never sounded so good.

Sirens

It is in the context of some of these introductory thoughts that I would like to consider a recent Italian contribution to thinking about futurity, Laura Pugno's 2007 novel *Sirene* (Sirens). In many respects, her novel is a perfect example of what Wu Ming call for in the "New Italian Epic." In *New Italian Epic: Letteratura, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro*, Wu Ming list a number of qualities that they associate with this supposedly new form of

⁴ And couldn't one make the same argument about Edelman? After all, what he finds in imagining a world without a future (or more precisely, a political imagination not predicated on the assumption of the future, and the future's uncontested goodness) is a kind of queer utopia. Despite all the talk about the death drive, Edelman is actually imagining a world more friendly to him, in which his own particular concerns have a fuller presence—not an absence. Weisman's approach is perhaps the most purely descriptive, but the Hollywood disaster-movie gaze posited by his book is also the most obviously narcissistically human. My point in bringing in De Man, however, is not to criticize this use of the "end of the future" as ideologically driven, narcissistic, and so on, but to point out that such narcissism is inevitable, driven as it is by De Man's "linguistic predicament."

epic. The New Italian Epic refuses the slapstick parodies of postmodernism, preferring instead the *serious* and the *just* (2009, 25); it adopts the “oblique gaze” of new perspectives (the extra-human, inhuman, and the undefined) (26-32); it combines narrative complexity with an inclination toward popular genre (32-34); it loves alternative histories, the “what if” story (34-37); it is linguistically experimental, but often in a hidden way (37-41); it produces “unidentified narrative objects” (41-44) that cannot be easily compartmentalized or labeled; and it appears in a space characterized by connections: the internet, multimedia, transmedia, fan fiction, adaptation, and so forth (44-47). One might add a characteristic to this list that is evident, if left unspoken by Wu Ming: the New Italian Epic is multilingual, as the Chinese name of the Wu Ming collective and the English title of their manifesto might suggest; this multilingualism appears unconsciously, as a natural cosmopolitanism of the internet age that requires no comment. The languages of preference for Wu Ming are, in addition to Italian, English, Spanish and Chinese (two parts of the book are titled *New Italian Epic* and *Sentimiento nuevo*), rather than German or French. This tacit multilingualism, of course, may be part of the subtle linguistic experimentation that Wu Ming lists as an explicit characteristic of the New Italian Epic.

On virtually all of these counts, *Sirene* is an excellent exemplar of the New Italian Epic.⁵ It is a serious novel (“desperately dark” might be a better description), with no hint of playful postmodern irony or self-reference, and it is a novel explicitly marked by an ethical dimension (specifically ecocritical). The perspective of the novel shifts from human to non-human, almost necessarily so, since the novel chronicles the final years of the human race. It combines an evidently sophisticated narrative with an acknowledged debt to Japanese manga, or comic books.⁶ The novel is a counterfactual history of the future: What if mermaids appeared in the Earth’s ocean? What if all of humanity were slowly dying of sun-induced cancers? It is certainly a difficult novel to categorize: science-fiction? Ecocriticism? Contemporary literature? “Laura Pugno” (here I refer both to the actual person and the authorial persona) is extensively plugged in to fan communities and the internet (she maintains both her own web page and a profile on Facebook, which she uses to promote her writing, discuss issues of interest, and engage in various forms of activism), typical of the networked and transmedia objects that Wu Ming consider properly “New Italian Epics.”

Finally, the novel provides a seamless blending of Anglo-American and Japanese toponyms and personal names in Wu Ming’s unspoken linguistic cosmopolitanism: characters include Samuel, Sadako and Hassan, who all live in a city called “Underwater” run by the *yakuza*, the Japanese mafia.⁷ The people worship Iemanjá, the Yoruba goddess

⁵ For a different treatment of Pugno’s *Sirene* with regard to the New Italian Epic, see Jansen (2010). She is primarily interested in *Sirene* and Wu Ming for the way that they articulate a posthumanist relationship between aesthetics and politics.

⁶ Pugno began her career as a poet (with works such as *Tennis*, 2001 and *La mente paesaggio*, 2010), and has translated Walter Scott (*Ivanhoe*, 2003), Oscar Wilde (*Il ritratto di Dorian Gray*, 1997) and Thomas Hardy (*Jude l’oscuro* in 1997). Her latest novel at the time of this writing is *Quando verrai* (2009).

⁷ Tiziano Scarpa noted that “L’ambientazione nel futuro è sottolineata linguisticamente anche da una certa quantità di parole anglofone, delle quali a rigore non ci sarebbe necessità, esistendone gli equivalenti italiani, ma che fungono da termini tecnici, da reperti-feticcio fantascientifici: *batch*, *facemask*, *memory cleansing*, *shot*, *freezer*, *data-entry*, *pet*, *scuba light*, *floating bed*, *weeds*, *modern primitives*, *blinds*, *blue-crab*, *scrub*, *on e off*, eccetera” (Scarpa 2007; The futuristic setting is also underlined linguistically by a

of the ocean, but she is a figure who is also worshipped extensively in Afro-American religions, from Santería to Voodoo (where she can be called, as Pugno no doubt knows, LaSiren). We have Africa, South America, the Caribbean, America, and Asia. Already we see that what this “what if” future history seems to lack is Europe—certainly there’s not much sign of, or even interest in, the future of Italy here. The future lies along a distinctly Southern hemisphere axis: South America, Africa, Southeast Asia.

What the novel has in recompense for its lost Europe is the mythical European mermaids, the sirens of the title. Some twenty years prior to the novel’s opening, mermaids appeared throughout the Earth’s oceans; while they physically resemble something like a cross between the mythological mermaids and real-world manatees, they seem to be entirely bestial. They are normally placid creatures, bovine and speechless, but they do possess razor-sharp teeth, used to kill their males immediately after mating with them. The miraculous appearance of these apparently mythic animals provokes a wide-ranging debate for humanity: Are they human, or animal? Gods or monsters? A portent of the coming end or a last chance? Regardless of our philosophical response, the novel is pitiless in depicting how humanity reacts to the appearance of mermaids: they are immediately rounded up, farmed, and used for sushi and sexual gratification.

The novel’s critiques are related to its over-determined title. Perhaps most clearly, it is meant to refer to the sounding of an environmental alarm. A siren goes off, loud and clear:

Qualcosa era cambiato nell’atmosfera, negli strati di protezione che separavano la Terra dalla stella del suo sistema, e ora il sole sembrava voler divorare l’umanità come un dio maligno. Un dio azteco che chiedeva sacrifici.

C’era chi credeva che le sirene fossero una mutazione genetica, un’evoluzione dei dugonghi o lamantini quasi estinti, per fronteggiare un mondo da cui l’essere umano era destinato a sparire. Altre creature, suboceaniche, avrebbero dominato la Terra (2007, 10)

(Something had changed in the atmosphere, in the layers of protection that separated the Earth from its system’s star, and now the sun appeared to want to devour humanity like an evil god. An Aztec god demanding sacrifices.

There were those who believed that the sirens were a genetic mutation, an evolution of the nearly extinct dugongs or manatees, in order to confront a world where human beings were destined to disappear. Other creatures, sub-oceanic, would dominate the Earth).

certain amount of Anglophone words, which rigorously speaking are unnecessary, since there exist Italian equivalents, but which function as technical terms, part of the science fiction official report-fetish: *batch*, *facemask*, *memory cleansing*, *shot*, *freezer*, *data-entry*, *pet*, *scuba light*, *floating bed*, *weeds*, *modern primitives*, *blinds*, *blue-crab*, *scrub*, *on and off*, et cetera).

The exact nature of this alarm is left unclear throughout the novel: while global warming, genetic experimentation, ozone depletion and overpopulation all appear as issues, it is certainly the sun that has, in some mysterious, symbolic or magical way, changed its relationship to the Earth's inhabitants. Human beings increasingly suffer from a "cancro nero," a black cancer that devours the epidermis and leads inevitably to death. The *cancro nero* is not only immune to treatment, but is also contagious.⁸ The appearance of the sirens does not coincide with the *cancro nero*, however: "La scoperta delle sirene era avvenuto una ventina d'anni addietro...molto prima dell'epidemia di cancro alla pelle" (2007, 10; The discovery of the sirens had happened twenty-odd years back...well before the epidemic of skin cancer). They are a mute presaging of a coming change, ideally adapted to the new world, and immune to the black cancer.

At the same time, "sirens" refers to the mythical creatures best known from the story of Ulysses. The story, of course, is a *mise-en-scène* of a certain male anxiety and concomitant fantasy: the sirens are a deadly seduction, femmes fatales who promise an unbearable and destructive *jouissance*, one that stages a quite literal encounter with the real (the rocks that lurk just under the water to the side of Ulysses' ship).⁹ At the same time, there is a male fantasy: that a kind of technological intervention (wax stoppers in the ears of the crew; Ulysses tied to the mast) would permit that feminine *jouissance* to be stolen—and nothing compares to the pleasure of stolen enjoyment. There is no question that Pugno's novel both utilizes and critiques this mythic substrate. The sirens of the novel are elaborately controlled through technology: kept in pens with electric leashes, estrus cycles elaborately monitored, carefully bred and selected. Every aspect of their existence is submitted to male technological intervention, all in order to produce enjoyment: siren sashimi, and sirens as sexual slaves. At times, these unbearable forms of *jouissance* are combined in what is evidently a gender-based critique of the figure of the Ulyssean siren: an old *yakuza* hunts one of the last wild sirens, for example, and once she is caught, he simultaneously rapes and eats her while she is still alive (51). But these last gasps of Ulyssean technological domination of feminine *jouissance* are just that: the old *yakuza* is dying, as are all the other men in the novel, sooner or later (there are, in fact, no women in *viva voce* in the novel—Sadako and Ivy, the novel's two female characters, are both dead before the action of the novel begins, and exist only in its backstory). One

⁸ Pugno, I should make clear, is not writing a "hard" science-fiction novel—she is less interested in the scientific dimension of her material than she is in its mythic and moral dimensions, the way in which human abuse of the environment is repaid through this ritual Aztec sacrifice.

⁹ On the sirens of the *Odyssey* as female *jouissance* that works as a suicidal attraction for men, see Renata Salecl, "The Silence of the Feminine Jouisissance" (1998). She notes that "the Sirens' song is the point in the narrative that has to remain unspoken...from the Lacanian perspective, this is another name for the real" (ibid., 177). New Lacanians generally speak of the real as what can't really be expressed openly, in language: trauma, ecstasy, the repressed, the unbearable, and so on. The sirens' song is very much the Lacanian real in this sense—it remains unsymbolized by Homer, who never tells us the content of their song; it represents for Ulysses a kind of unspeakable and forbidden ecstasy; and while their song is tempting, it is also fatal, and thus stands for the unbearable possibility that we might, on some level, wish for our own destruction. Finally, the material world (the rocks beneath the waves) is itself "real" for Lacanians, since it remains stuck in its dumb facticity, always remaining untouched by our world of symbols and language, untouched by human concerns. For a review of the more traditional modern reception of the Sirens in the West, see Hugo Rahner's *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (1971, 328-386), which delineates the historical elaboration of moral sense to the episode of the sirens, which largely represent a temptation that must be known, not in order to experience it, but to avoid it.

would be remiss in discussing the Ulyssean sirens, however, if one did not also mention that the specific form of domination the story recounts is a technological domination of the female *voice*. Ulysses does not silence the sirens, but rather dominates and domesticates their deadly but seductive voice. The sleight-of-hand at work in the story is the conversion of the power of that unbearable but inchoate feminine voice into a masculine epic of male cleverness.

And here we arrive at the third sense of the novel's title: the little mermaid (*La sirenetta* in Italian). The Hans Christian Andersen story reworks the figure of the siren as a tragic figure rather than a menacing one, inverting its Ulyssean co-ordinates but making it no less of a male fantasy. Here, the siren voluntarily gives up her intoxicating voice to pursue the love of a handsome prince. It is not necessary here to recount the various tortures that the little mermaid inflicts on herself in order to ultimately be rejected by the man she loves. A mute young girl, a perfect dancer, who adores the man from afar; he may play with her or discard her as he chooses—meanwhile, although the threat that the siren represents in the *Odyssey* repeatedly surfaces (the *sirenetta*'s seductive voice, the magic knife she may use to slay the prince and reclaim her voice and life), it is always defused by the mermaid herself, voluntarily, without even the need for the intervention of technology. Pugno's sirens are as passive as cows, offering no resistance, gazing on their human (and always male) oppressors from their other, watery world, perfect little mermaids.

Voices

Here one would have to note that all of the different mermaid tales depend on a kind of transformation. In the case of *The Odyssey*, we would have to say that the transformation is from song into poetry. In the Andersen story, there are multiple transformations: the little mermaid, of course, turns into sea foam at the end of the story, while her lost voice is, as ever, substituted by the male author's voice instead. The question of futurity in these stories, however, needs explication. The figure of the siren is always caught up in the possibility of there being no future. That is, the sirens' call always speaks to a possible end of time; there is always a note of fatality in their song. This note, of course, is also always a suicidal drive. This is true in an exteriorized way (Ulysses knows that the siren song will lead him and his crew to destruction) and in an interiorized way for the little mermaid (the overall effect of that story is to redefine the essence of good womanhood as self-sacrifice, in a fairly literal fashion). The warning sirens we hear today (global warming, Frankenfood, overpopulation, etc.) are all warnings that we might not have a future, framed in terms of an ethical concern for the other (we must take care of the planet), but ultimately pragmatically concerned with our own survival. Or, to say the same thing in a different way, the radical ambivalence of the siren is that the death drive is both monstrous and terrifying, an alien other I must resist, and at the same time is unbearably seductive, the promise of the mermaid's tail split in two to offer access to her *jouissance*. In every case, what represents the future is the *voice*, the possibility of making a meaningful sound that could be taken as a sign by another symbolic consciousness. In fact, De Man, quite rightly, would almost assuredly note that this voice

is also always to be understood as the possibility of tropological language, specifically personification; the sound of the future is always prosopopeia.

Pugno's *Sirene* tells the story of Samuel, one of the "disperati" (2007, 11; desperate ones) who cannot afford the underwater resorts of the ultra-wealthy, or the heavy bunkers of the middle-class. He is employed by the *yakuza* to work with the sirens in their underwater pens, regulating their mating, checking their offspring, killing those that need to be culled. His tragic backstory is recounted in bits and pieces throughout the novel, centering particularly on his lost "true love," Sadako, a young woman who was cast off by a high-ranking pedophile *yakuza* when she grew too old for his tastes, and "given" to Samuel. Sadako dies of the black cancer, her magnificently tattooed skin (virtually her entire body aside from her face is covered by *kanji*) erased by the disease, well before the novel begins, providing a central trauma around which Samuel's subjectivity and character are formed.

The memory of Sadako doesn't stop Samuel from doing what precipitates all of the action in the novel: he mates with one of the sirens, a silvery "half-albino." His motivations are never entirely clear, although it is certain that sirens represent a point of fetishistic fascination for all of the characters in the novel, including the few female ones, and it appears that the experience is in some obscure way linked to Samuel's loss of his beloved Sadako. Impossibly, the half-albino siren conceives, and the resulting "mezzoumana" (half-human) or "sanguemisto" (half-breed, or more literally, mixed blood) appears in almost every respect to be a normal siren. The differences are few, but potentially crucial:

Di umano il sanguemisto aveva solo occhi e labbra, e l'apparato fonatorio. Lì agli impianti era impossibile fare indagini approfondite sul cervello, pensò Samuel, area di Broca e così via. Ma per quanto riguardava il corpo, sarebbe stato possibile insegnarle a parlare (2007, 61)

(The half-breed's only human traits were her eyes and lips, and the vocal apparatus. Here at the operations center it was impossible to carry out detailed investigations on the brain, thought Samuel, Broca's area and so on. But as far as the body went, it should be possible to teach her to speak).

Although most of the novel is caught up in Samuel's mental life (his obsession with Sadako), his attempts to preserve his half-human daughter, and a bit of action thriller (chased by the *yakuza*, dying of the black cancer), in many respects the central question of the novel is whether or not the young siren can be taught to speak. Samuel names his daughter "Mia." It is an Italian name to be sure, but it is never clear—since Samuel is presumably not Italian—if instead this is just the 'translation' of the word "Mine," or even "my thing" (there are numerous parallels in the novel between Mia and Sadako, as we will see). Samuel's attempts to save her and teach her to speak are equally part of a larger endeavor to preserve not simply some human DNA, but perhaps more importantly, the possibility of human speech (which, again, is to say that Samuel wishes to preserve

the notion of the future itself).

There are problems with this future, however. Among other things, it is not precisely the future of humanity that we are talking about, but rather more properly, the future of *men*. Men who show themselves at every turn to be less than deserving of a future, from the pedophile and animal rapist of the *yakuza* to Samuel himself, who is little better (he eventually whips and then rapes his own daughter, Mia). The *yakuza* reduce Sadako to a largely mute creature; her primary mode of expression is the language of men tattooed onto her body along with the brand marking her natural father on her back. Sadako appears to love her tattoos, but what she says about them is ambiguous. “Questa...è una lingua incapace di mentire” (2007, 48; This...is a language incapable of lying). What is the language that cannot lie? On the one hand, it gestures towards an orientalist fantasy of kanji, that ideograms are rooted in the thing itself, escaping Saussure’s arbitrariness; they are not signs but the real language of things captured in pictures. On the other hand, this language is the language of the cruelty of men, their willingness to turn women’s bodies into the parchment on which they express themselves. Clearly there is something of Wu Ming’s critique here: Are we so sure that we deserve to last forever? At whose expense do we purchase our future? And Samuel’s choice of names for his daughter expresses precisely the same impulse toward the future as that of the *yakuza* who branded Sadako: far from a collective *impegno* (commitment), I always project an image of myself when I imagine the future. Every personification of a future voice (artificially intelligent computers, alien species, half-human, half-siren hybrids) is always a ventriloquizing of my own voice.

Indeed, Samuel eventually tattoos Mia in exactly the same “language that does not lie” (*kanji*). This language is not just a way of showing the cruelty of men “written on the body” (as Samuel appears to compulsively and unconsciously repeat these earlier scenes of male cruelty), but is also a fundamental expression of female muteness. From Hélène Cixous to Kaja Silverman, feminist theorists have noted a cultural fantasy of the silenced woman, the Medusa beheaded or the female voice in cinema de-synchronized from her body. The sirens of mythology are one of its clearest expressions. In this sense, it would be a remarkable thing indeed if the voice of the future were entrusted to what is essentially an all-female species (the males of the siren species are used only for mating and then killed by the females—they are fundamentally drones). On some level, the ideograms tattooed on Mia and Sadako stand as a kind of anti-language; the ideogram or hieroglyph is a language that—to the Western male subject, at least—appears both as a *secret* language that is inaccessible to him (the language of female suffering, perhaps, or of *jouissance* itself) as well as the essence of incomprehensibility. Kanji, ideograms, hieroglyphs and the like are quite literally “analfabeti,” the Italian term for “illiterate” that more literally means “without the alphabet.” The language “proper” to the novel’s female subjects then is both their secret pleasure-in-pain (Sadako loves her tattoos) as much as it is silence, or the absence of proper speech.

Sadako is *analfabeta* in that the language written on her body is not alphabetic at all, while Mia is even more completely without language—until she learns to speak. She says only one word, and she does not speak it well. “Mia guai di nuovo, più forte. La lingua tremava, batteva contra i denti, il palato si contraeva.... Qualcosa le vibrava nella gola.... Shhh—... Sss—...S—a—a...m—u...S—a—m—u—u...Samuel” (119; Mia whined again, louder. Her tongue trembled, beat against her teeth, her palate contracted.... Something was

vibrating in her throat.... *Shhh—...Sss—...S—a—a...m—u...S—a—m—u—u...Samuel*). Samuel is skeptical about the content behind this utterance: “Era poco più di un guaito, e certamente Mia non comprendeva il concetto di nome” (120; It was little more than a whine and Mia certainly did not understand the concept of a name)—but not perhaps as skeptical as he thinks he is. Samuel rapes Mia once she speaks, after beating her nearly unconscious with an electric lash. His behavior appears to be entirely unmotivated within the novel—there has been no growing animus or frustration (Pugno’s characterization of Samuel is enigmatic, flat, often affectless, and his motivations are often unclear)—unless it is a response to her speech, to Mia having some language other than the “language that does not lie” of male cruelty tattooed on her skin.

Indeed, Mia will eventually demonstrate that she *does* understand the concept of a name; like the little mermaid, she maintains a curious devotion to her abuser. As Samuel eventually succumbs to the *cancro nero*, floating in the siren tank back at the *yakuza* headquarters, Mia manages to moan his name twice more. (The scene appears to deliberately recall the first encounter between the little mermaid and the prince in the water.)

Ispezionava il corpo di Samuel.... Le gambe, più di tutto, la incuriosivano. Si immerse e nuotò intorno a lui, premendo il muso contro i muscoli delle cosce e l’incavo delle ginocchia.... Soffiò, sputando acqua.... Mia soffiò..., contraendo disperatamente il palato, la lingua che tremava.... *Shhh—...Sss—...S—a—a...m—u...S—a—m—u—u...Samuel* (2007, 139)

(She inspected Samuel’s body.... His legs especially intrigued her. She submerged and swam around him, pressing her snout against his thigh muscles, the back of the knees.... She breathed out, spitting water.... Mia breathed out, desperately contracting her palate, her tongue atremble....*Shhh—...Sss—...S—a—a...m—u...S—a—m—u—u...Samuel*).

At this point, the novel follows a fairly typical cinematic procedure: Samuel, moved by this sign of recognition, and recognizing Mia’s speech as a possible form of personal continuity (the animal will carry Samuel’s name forward into a new future of human speech), sacrifices himself in order to save her from the *yakuza*, who seem to be intent on their usual diet of mermaid sushi and rape. He also realizes that Mia is pregnant with his child, who will presumably share the sirens’ resistance to the *cancro nero*.

The Problem of Ending

This promising Hollywood scenario of a father’s sacrifice to save his daughter’s future (and the future of humanity) is undone by the novel’s ending, however, a vision of a radical loss of the future. Soon after Samuel’s death, the city of Underwater is

abandoned, the oceans abandoned as the *yakuza* pursue yet another mythical cure for the *cancro nero*, the skin of the “semi-extinct” African Bushmen. Pugno’s narrator predicts “un futuro radioso” (2007, 144; a radiant future) for the *yakuza*, but the value of this radiant future is certainly ironized—this salvation of humanity is predicated on technologies that do not yet exist (a full-body skin transplant, the ability to grow the semi-extinct Bushmen skin in a laboratory) as much as it is on a full denial of that humanity (the *yakuza* assume that in the meantime they will just have to skin some Africans). Moreover, the narrator’s choice of words is certainly ironic, as this “radiant” future is assuredly a future that is radioactive, more filled with the sun’s deadly rays than ever before. But perhaps the reader can find the future in prosopopeia, the projection of our own voice beyond our graves, the literal personification (the granting of linguistic personhood) of the sirens? The novel’s closing passage offers no such hope, closing with a trope that is, quite literally, an objectification rather than a personification:

Nell’acqua aperta dell’oceano, Mia soffiò.

Shhh–

Sss–

S–a–a

m–u.

S–a–m–u–u.

Samuel.

Quando era molto stanca, o lontana dal branco, le tornava in gola quel verso. Mia non soffiava mai davanti alle altre femmine, mai davanti alle beta. Non ricordava più che era il verso di Samuel. Non sapeva neanche dove si trovassero, lei e il suo branco, sulle mappe degli esseri umani.... Quello era l’oceano.

La mente di Mia era *tabula rasa* (145)

(In the open water of the ocean, Mia breathed out.

Shhh–

Sss–

S–a–a

m–u.

S–a–m–u–u.

Samuel.

When she was very tired, or far away from the school, that call came back into her throat. Mia never breathed out in front of the other females, never in front of the beta females. She no longer remembered that this was Samuel’s call. She didn’t even know where she was, she and her school, on the human beings’ maps... That was the ocean.

Mia’s mind was *tabula rasa*).

Pugno’s grim “*tabula rasa*” is an image of “no future”—no history to be written

down, because there is no longer any language to write it down in, no human (or human-like) mind to read it. Mia bears Samuel's daughter, three-quarters human, but born into a world without language. Pugno's solution to De Man's "linguistic predicament" (which is now gendered) is to turn away from personification: there is no human face or mask, but a de-personified and animal call ("S-a-m-u-u") that is rapidly losing its meaning at the novel's end. Pugno's penchant for de-personifying (for objectifying in a tropological sense) is one of the most disturbing aspects of the novel—its human characters do not behave in ways that are human, let alone humane, and her non-human characters remain just as impassive and inexplicable.

At the end of *Corpo in figure*, Adriana Cavarero analyzes a short story by Ingeborg Bachmann, a story about "Ondina" in the Italian translation.¹⁰ Cavarero is interested here in finding modes of narrating woman in ways that depart from the Western norms that assign Logos to men and consign women entirely to the realm of the bodily and material—in the case of Bachmann, Cavarero finds potential in the deliberate and self-conscious acceptance of this bodily muteness; Ondina withdraws from the whole system into an incomprehensible space of total alterity, but an alterity that is now her own, rather than temporarily "on loan" from the language of men.

Se ne va nel suo altrove, anzi in quell'altrove che è sempre stato suo e che l'immaginario maschile ha preso solo in prestito.... Come le mute creature dell'acqua, "muta sarò presto anch'io," aveva infatti preannunciato Ondina all'inizio. Che è così ora, in un certo senso, muta perché tale la prevede la sua stessa icona, ma è soprattutto muta al linguaggio degli uomini.... [V]uole esprimersi, in altri segni e in altri gesti, nell'assenza di ogni codice...per lo meno questo è il sogno, la grande utopia, l'inumano desiderio di Ondina. La quale appunto se ne va e tace per sempre, intonando forse negli abissi verdastri un canto circolare la cui eco noi, donne di umana specie, non potremo mai né capire né udire (1995, 234)

She departs into her elsewhere, in fact into that elsewhere that has always been hers, and which the masculine imaginary has only borrowed.... Like the mute creatures of the water, "I, too, will be mute soon," Ondina had in fact said at the start. And so she is now, in a certain sense, mute, because her very own icon proclaims her so; but she is above all mute to the language of men.... [S]he wants to express herself in other signs, in other gestures, in the absence of every code...or at least this is her dream, her great utopia, her inhuman desire. She departs and falls silent forever, perhaps starting a circular song deep in the greenish abysses, a song whose echo we, women of the human species, could neither ever understand nor

¹⁰ The name Ondina suggests "little wave" in Italian, and can refer to a water nymph; Bachmann was no doubt referring to Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine*, a popular nineteenth-century novel about a mermaid who curses her unfaithful human husband to stop breathing should he ever fall asleep.

hear.¹¹

Cavarero imagines Ondina and all the mermaids of literature welcoming the drowned Ophelia in her final sentence. The dilemma she is working with, as with the question of catastrophe and its aftermath, is how to speak from the “other side” (which is here both the other side of death and the other side of a world not based on the primacy of masculine Logos), a place so radically other that it speaks no language whatsoever, or a language so alien that one is uncertain that it is a language at all. The only possible register is that of *suggestion*, which is the solution used by both Cavarero and perhaps by Pugno, as well: one cannot simply say it without effectively “gentrifying” that alien world, re-colonizing it with human speech or the speech of men (if they are ever different). Any movement that renders it comprehensible also dispels its radical difference, covers up its alien face with a human mask, to turn again to the figure of prosopopeia.

James Berger’s *After the End* is a meditation on precisely the problem this essay addresses: what kind of language can one use to speak of what happens after the end? Berger finds, first of all, that stories about the apocalypse are characterized by their curious temporality: on the one hand, they invoke a language of prophecy in which the apocalyptic end is so certain that it as if it has already happened. In fact, in many science fiction treatments, it already has—the story may make use of time travel so that protagonists of today struggle against a future that, in some sense, has already taken place for them. At the same time, these narratives also tell of the time *after* the end, a narrative space that should be impossible. “Something,” Berger writes, “is left over” (Berger 1999, 6), something that allows the space of the “after the end” to signify. Earlier, he notes that “everything after the end, in order to gain, or borrow, meaning, must point back...” (1999, xi). I would particularly stress the notion of borrowing here, because it seems most relevant for De Man’s celestial prosopopeia: a human face is effectively borrowed, taken on loan, from the time before, the time of stories, in order to recount the impossible, inhuman and faceless time that comes after the ending. In short, the absolute break or rupture of apocalypse can never be absolute, never a full break, because it must always—with the help of figurative language—surreptitiously reach back and bring the dramatic mask of prosopopeia to “en-face” the otherwise incomprehensible and meaningless space after the end.

If the post-apocalypse is characterized by a contradictory temporality, Berger also suggests that there is a larger rhetorical contradiction at stake: how to represent the very unrepresentability of the post-apocalypse? That is, one borrows from the past to describe the world after the end (future wastelands always look like things we’ve already seen, from nuclear bomb sites to ecological wastelands to concentration camps), but one must also speak of the future’s unspeakability (both for its absolute alterity and the social prohibitions against describing scenes of such horror). Berger suggests that sex often mediates this problem (*ibid.*, 14-17), both for the social prohibition against speaking about it, and the absolute annihilation of the self that is implicitly part of the act. Berger’s preferred figure for this dilemma is Lacanian *jouissance*: the agonizing pleasure of the

¹¹ Translations are my own throughout, but the work in its entirety may be consulted in English translation (de Lucca and Shemek 2002).

unspeakable, both forbidden and unrepresentable, one that puts an end to the speaking subject (although Berger notes that this subject returns afterwards, to speak about this obliteration of self and speech, a typical figure of romantic poetry). Finally, Berger connects this *jouissance* to a kind of feminist apocalypse: a fully sexual woman, in full possession of the non-language of her body (ibid., 15)—recompense for the many apocalyptic narratives in which he suggests the authors imagine the end of the world as a way of showing what was really important and it turns out that feminism was not one of those “truly important” things.

But Pugno’s operation is less utopian than Berger and Cavarero might suggest—she ends by objectifying Mia’s mind (a kind of “last mind” in the novel’s apocalyptic vision of the future), calling it a “blank slate.” One might find some comfort in this objectified and de-personalized metaphor, at least for its stability and endurance, but Pugno repeatedly refers in *Sirene* to human consciousness as vapor, saying that “La mente è vapore che si alza di una ciotola di riso” (see Pugno 2007, 65; see also 139, 144; The mind is steam rising from a bowl of rice). That steam is destined to evaporate (like the meaning in Mia’s animal call), vanish without a trace, as the universe cools down into its rigid and final stasis, whether that is a tepid bowl of soup or a frozen, crystalline cemetery. Naturally, there is no way around De Man’s dilemma: calling a mind “the steam that rises from rice” or “a blank slate” is still figurative language, but it is telling that Pugno avoids personification in the sense of prosopopeia, giving a human face to something. Perhaps more remarkable still, I do not think Pugno is imagining this future as a metaphor *for* anything else, either—it is neither Cavarero’s embodied “other thinking” nor Berger’s feminine *jouissance*, and it is remarkably reluctant to give its readers the apocalypse as the revelation of a previously concealed truth.¹² The real end of the world, the historical end, will not be a historical event—it will not be recorded in any archive, and it will have no witnesses. There will not be a bang, and there will not even be a whimper. It will go unrepresented. Pugno is perhaps radical in her borrowing an inhuman mask, the face of the dugong or manatee, the slate wiped clean, or steam wisping into the air to represent this end; such inhuman masks do indeed elicit our reflections on what we are doing to ourselves and to the planet, turn our thoughts to the *longue durée*. But even Pugno’s objective and alienating language must fall short of the end of history, the unthinkable time in which there will be no thought, the forever that we will never know.

¹² Teresa Heffernan, writing in *Post-Apocalyptic Culture*, notes (as does Berger) that the apocalypse has historically been seen as a moment of redemption and clarification, the emergence of a new world, pure, simple and immediate. For Heffernan, the term “post-apocalypse” instead suggests that “we live in a time after the apocalypse, after the faith in a radically new world, of revelation, of unveiling” (2008, 6). What would it mean, Heffernan wonders, if our inability to speak about the end were not a structural “linguistic dilemma,” but was caused by the fact that “the destruction of archives is itself a historical event” (7)? But while Heffernan mourns the loss of the ending as a metaphor for a radical form of potentially utopian thought, Pugno is closer to Wu Ming’s thought of the real long view—one day, there will be no more human beings.

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