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LAURA TODESCHINI
Università degli Studi di Bergamo

The World Was All Before Them: From Preservation to Reconfiguration in Shelley's *The Last Man* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

Abstract

This article traces shifting literary responses to environmental catastrophe and species extinction in *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood. Through the figures of Lionel Verney and Jimmy (aka Snowman), the novels reimagine the trope of the last man to reflect evolving conceptions of ecological crisis, subjectivity, and human-nonhuman relationality. Shelley's post-apocalyptic landscape emerges as an elegiac space of metaphysical solitude and symbolic ruins, while Atwood depicts a genetically reengineered biosphere shaped by techno-capitalist excess and biopolitical control. The article argues that the shift from Shelley's Romantic ecophobia to Atwood's posthuman eco-alienation marks a broader transformation in literary imaginaries of the future: from the sublime indifference to the hyper-mediated ecologies of the Anthropocene. Framed through the lens of *ecophobia*, the study explores how narration functions as a mechanism of cultural memory and symbolic resistance, recasting survival from a biological imperative into an act of linguistic and ethical persistence. Ultimately, the article seeks to demonstrate that Shelley and Atwood, despite their divergent aesthetics and temporal registers, converge in their portrayal of storytelling as a vital strategy for negotiating the disintegration of anthropocentric paradigms.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, Margaret Atwood, *The Last Man*, *Oryx and Crake*, Apocalypse, ecophobia, ecological resistance, Anthropocene, posthumanism, ecocriticism

Et cette journée était belle pour la décadence du monde
J.B. Cousin de Grainville

1. Last men and beyond

At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, European literature began to articulate visions of catastrophe that could no longer be confined within the boundaries of

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myth and theology. A profound transformation emerged in the perception of time and nature: traditional frameworks for conceiving the end of the world began to dissolve, giving way to new configurations shaped by a secular and irreversible understanding of disappearance. For the first time, the death of the world became imaginable as a natural phenomenon, an outcome inscribed in the very fabric of matter itself.

It is within this pivotal moment that *Le Dernier Homme* (1805) by Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville is situated. Widely regarded as one of the earliest manifestations of apocalyptic science fiction *avant la lettre* (Ransom 2014: 315), the novel unfolds as a poetic prose narrative depicting a world on the brink of terminal decline. Set in an exhausted environment and amidst the ruins of a collapsed civilization, the story centres on two human figures, Omégar and Sydérie, poised at the threshold of the final possibility of reproduction. Against the backdrop of a transfigured Paris, a city stripped of its historical and cultural coordinates and rendered into a spectral wasteland devoid of identity (Polegri 2024: 8), the novel constructs an imaginative tableau of ultimate extinction. In a world devoid of shared purposes and collective ideals, the protagonists' hesitation toward procreation signals a disjunction between the drive for biological survival and the potential for a meaningful, communal existence. Within this liminal space, where life has not yet entirely vanished but has ceased to signify, literature begins to reconceptualize the notion of erasure, no longer as a singular and absolute event, but as a sustained condition. Cousin de Grainville's prose poem anticipates the emergence of a distinctly apocalyptic literary mode, one that, over the following two centuries, would extensively elaborate representations of the last human being and contribute to the formation of a narrative tradition aligned within the broader apocalyptic imaginary of the 19th century.

In continuity with the anticipatory vision of *Le Dernier Homme*, *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley inherits and reworks many of the same existential anxieties, while articulating them through a distinctly altered register. Whereas Cousin de Grainville's text casts human extinction within an allegorical and theological framework, resonant with a still pre-Romantic sensibility, Shelley reimagines the same apocalyptic imaginary in secular and profoundly introspective terms[1]. The end envisioned in *The Last Man* no longer unfolds within the contours of

[1] Shelley's novel emerges in the context of the author's emotional devastation following a series of personal losses, which left her feeling like "the last relic of a beloved race, [her] companions extinct before [her]" (Shelley in Paley 2008: vii-viii). Critics have frequently observed that *The Last Man* reflects Shelley's need to memorialize those she had lost,

eschatological theology; rather, it emerges as a catastrophe devoid of redemption, unfolding outside any providential design or promise of salvation (Paley 1989: 7). Despite the differing narrative form and discursive frameworks, the two works in question converge in their response to a shared imperative: to represent the crisis of the human in a world that has lost its orientation. This loss is not merely cosmological or biological; it is equally symbolic and political. The ruins traversed by Omégar and Sydérie, as well as by Lionel Verney, are not material remnants but also emblems of cultural collapse. Both works, albeit with varying intensity, reflect the disillusionment that followed the failure of the grand utopian visions of modernity, from the revolutionary promise of regeneration heralded by the French Revolution to the rational idea of progress championed by the Enlightenment. The disintegration of these salvific narratives, often imbued with millenarian, religious, or humanistic overtones, leaves behind a void that literature now seeks to inhabit.

Within this historical and symbolic rapture, *The Last Man* finds its place. Although set in a near future, the novel is shaped by anxieties of the post-Napoleonic era in which it was conceived. The extinction of humanity, brought about by a pandemic of unknown origin, unfolds under the sign of a pervasive melancholy, embodied in the narrative voice of Lionel Verney. As an isolated and introspective figure, Verney moves through the ruins of a civilization with a gaze suspended between memory and loss, encapsulating the profound uncertainty of his time. In contrast to Grainville's allegorical and collectivist framework, Shelley constructs her narrative around a fractured modern subjectivity, transforming catastrophe into an inward and perceptual experience. The choice of a solitary narrator serves not only to articulate the mourning for the end of the world, but also to critically interrogate the illusions of modern civilization: its faith in science, politics, and communal cohesion. In the face of total dissolution, it is the isolated consciousness that is left to bear alone the burden of meaning and memory.

The apocalyptic imaginary of the early 19th century was fuelled not only by the political and cultural traumas of the post-revolutionary period, but also by exceptional natural events that profoundly unsettled prevailing notions of human mastery over the physical world. Among these, the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815, on the island of Sumbawa (Indonesia), stands as a pivotal moment in the formation of early Romantic apocalyptic aesthetic and sensibilities. It was the

with the characters of Adrian and Raymond widely interpreted as literary transpositions of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, respectively (Mekler 2008: 74).

most powerful volcanic eruption recorded in modern history, with a Volcanic Explosivity Index of 7 and an estimated death toll of approximately 71,000 (Oppenheimer 2003: 249). The atmospheric consequences were global in scale: ash injected into the stratosphere triggered a dramatic decline in temperatures and widespread climatic disruption, setting off a cascade of famines and epidemics that affected large parts of the world. The year 1816, subsequently dubbed 'the year without a summer', quickly assumed a symbolic status in the collective perception of nature's volatility. The darkened skies and summer snowfalls generated a pervasive sense of dread, traces of which can be discerned through 19th century European literary culture.

Darkness (1816) by Lord Byron, written in the immediate aftermath of the eruption, perhaps most powerfully crystallizes this experience. The poem presents a world deprived of sunlight, plunged into perpetual darkness, and inhabited by human beings reduced to mere survival, descending into a state of barbarism. In this vision stripped of transcendence and devoid of any promise of redemption, humanity is offered neither salvation nor solace: its annihilation unfolds within cosmic silence, governed by an indifferent nature. The poem's conclusion gestures toward the figure of a last man, sealing the contours of a post-apocalyptic imaginary that was beginning to take shape. The motif of eternal darkness supplanting life and light would find further resonance in Thomas Campbell's *The Last Man* (1823)[2], where it emerges as a powerful emblem of existential finality. Though often relegated to the status of a mere literary curiosity, Campbell's poem, published only a few years before Shelley's novel, shared with *Darkness* the motif of an isolated subjectivity that endures beyond the end, constituting an additional element in the formation of a narrative trope that would become central to 20th century speculative literature. Indeed, by the early decades of the 19th century, the imaginary of collective extinction emerges with growing insistence across a range of artistic and literary productions. In addition to the previously cited works by Byron, Campbell, and Shelley, a variety of artistic productions can be identified under the title of the "Last Man". Although these

[2] The question of influence between Lord Byron and Campbell's poems remains unsolved. Upon the publication of Campbell's The *Last Man* in *The New Monthly Magazine*, the author was promptly accused of plagiarism, with the work dismissed as a pale imitation of Byron's *Darkness*. In response, Campbell defended the originality of this inspiration, asserting that he shared the subject matter with another contemporary author, Barry Cornwall (Stafford 1994: 199-200). Nonetheless, the affinities between the texts appear to point less directly to textual dependence than to the emergence of a shared cultural atmosphere in which apocalyptic themes gained collective resonance.

narratives differ significantly in tone and purpose, ranging from elegiac melancholy to the grotesque, they nonetheless converge in their aesthetic engagement with the extinction of humanity: Thomas Lovell Beddoes' unfinished drama (1823-1825), Thomas Hood's satirical ballad (1826), a painting by John Martin (1826), and an anonymous fragment published in *Blackwood's Magazine* (1826) (Stafford 1994: 199). While anguish predominates in these works, John Keats' *To Autumn* (1820), composed only a few years later, responds to the same climatic context with an ostensibly more serene tone, though not without underlying disquiet. The poem's celebration of the harvest season and the cyclical rhythms of nature can be interpreted, considering the famines and meteorological upheavals of the preceding decade, as an attempt to restore a sense of order and continuity in the human-nature relationship (Bate 1996: 440). Yet even here, an awareness of transience, and thus of vulnerability, emerges, manifesting in the poem's delicate balance between vitality and decline.

In these various responses, nature ceases to function as a neutral backdrop or pliable resource. Instead, it assumes the characteristics of an autonomous, opaque, and unpredictable agent capable of abruptly overturning human order. The apocalyptic representations of this period thus signal a shift away from an anthropocentric worldview toward a decentered vision in which the foundational paradigms of progress, rationality, and control are critically unsettled. Catastrophe is no longer construed as the consequence of divine will or moral transgression, but rather as the outcome of material forces that elude human governance, rendering survival, and even meaning itself, profoundly uncertain. What emerges is a conception of nature no longer as an exploitable asset but as an active, volitional presence, untethered from any subservient role in relation to human survival or well-being. This reconfiguration of nature anticipates the emergence of a sensibility that, in contemporary terms, may be understood through the concept of *ecophobia*. This term extends beyond the mere expression of fear, encompassing a reactive and oppositional stance marked by the rejection of nature as an entity resistant to human control. According to Simon C. Estok (2009), ecophobia manifests as:

> […] an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world […]. It plays out in many spheres: it sustains the personal hygiene and cosmetics industries (which cite nature's "flaws" and "blemishes" as objects of their work); it supports city sanitation boards that issue fines seeking to keep out "pests" and "vermin" associated in municipal mentalities with long grass; it keeps beauticians and barbers in business; it is behind landscaped gardens and trimmed poodles in women's handbags on the Seoul subway system; it

> is about power and control; it is what makes looting and plundering of animal and nonanimal resources possible. (208)

From this perspective, 19th century apocalyptic narratives should not be read merely as variations on the Romantic theme of decline, but rather as early indications of a latent ecological crisis. The trope of the last man is inextricably bound to this tension: the survival of a lone individual in a lifeless and hostile environment becomes an allegory for the failure of anthropocentrism, anticipating concerns that now fall squarely within the domain of ecocritical discourse.

This narrative lineage finds a compelling continuation in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy[3], particularly in *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the first volume of the saga, which reconfigures the image of the last man within a post-apocalyptic framework shaped by a human-induced mass extinction. In this context, ecophobia is expressed through a desire to reengineer nature via bioengineering – reducing it to a system that can be optimized according to functional and technocratic logics. The character of Crake, the novel's demiurgic scientist, embodies a Promethean impulse toward absolute control over the vegetal and animal realms, culminating in the creation of genetically modified life forms: the Crakers, designed to replace humanity and to ensure a purported ecological harmony. As in 19th century narratives, Atwood positions the survival of the last man, represented by Jimmy, also known as Snowman, as testimonial in function. He becomes both witness and archivist of the species' collapse, marked by the same existential solitude and sense of loss that define Lionel Verney. The connection between the two works unfolds not only at the thematic level of extinction, but also through their shared portrayal of a disillusioned subject, compelled to confront the consequences of a failed anthropology.

Scholarly engagement with Shelley's *The Last Man* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* has increasingly situated both texts within ecocritical, posthumanist, and narratological frameworks, reflecting their complex negotiations with environmental catastrophe, human isolation, and the dissolution of anthropocentric paradigms. Recent scholarship has foregrounded Shelley's use of theatricality as a critical lens through which the author interrogates the limits of Romantic utopianism, showing how her deployment of dramatic tropes stages a complex reflection on the instability of representation and the ethical

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[3] The *MaddAddam* trilogy comprises three volumes: *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013).

possibilities of sympathy and collective affect in the face of historical catastrophe (Wagner-Lawlor 2002); alongside this, *The Last Man* has also been reassessed as an early intervention in climate-conscious literature, with critics reading the plague's atmospheric diffusion as a figurative anticipation of planetary crisis (Richardson 2019). Similarly, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* has attracted sustained critical interest as a paradigmatic example of speculative fiction engaging with the intersections of late capitalism, biotechnological intervention, and ecological collapse. Scholars have widely explored the novel's portrayal of corporate domination of the biosphere, situating the last man motif within broader cultural anxieties about environmental precarity and posthuman features (Cooke 2006; Hambuch 2013); further scholarship has examined how the narrative's doubled temporal structure maps onto the logic of trauma, framing the post-apocalyptic scenario as both a literal and psychological landscape in which personal and global catastrophes are mutually constitutive and recursively inscribed (Snyder 2011). Although some comparative studies have traced thematic continuities between the two works, these analyses tend to emphasize mythological and structural affinities without fully addressing the evolving affective regimes that underpin their representations of nature and extinction (Hunt 2023; Bender 2019; Mohr 2015). This article proposes a different approach by employing the concept of ecophobia, as theorized by Estok, as a critical framework for a diachronic reading of the last man trope in both texts. Ecophobia, understood as a culturally embedded aversion to the agency and unpredictability of the nonhuman world, allows for a reassessment of how Shelley and Atwood each stage environmental catastrophe not merely as a narrative event but as a disruption of ontological and epistemological boundaries.

Building on these premises, the present analysis examines how Shelley's *The Last Man* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* articulate, nearly two centuries apart, literary responses to the catastrophe and the disintegration of the human. By comparing the post-apocalyptic landscapes that frame each narrative, the essay underlines how both texts translate the rupture between civilization and nature, while tracing their respective cultural and ideological genealogies. Within this framework, the trajectories of the protagonists will be explored, with particular attention to the strategies through which the individual seeks to reinscribe meaning into a world emptied of coherence. Also, the role of storytelling will be taken into consideration as a critical space in which the human-environment relation is redefined: not merely as a record of disaster, but as a potential act of symbolic and imaginative construction.

2. Geographies of the Apocalypse: Abandonment and hostility

In Shelley's and Atwood's novels, the post-apocalyptic landscape operates less as a scenic background than as an epistemological framework through which the limits and conditions of representation are critically examined. The apocalyptic event erases the social context, generating a perceptual rupture that compels the last men to reconfigure the relationship between the human and the environment, language and memory, survival and narration. The scenes of destruction operate as a manifestation of both semiotic and ontological crisis, extending well beyond the bounds of mere sensationalist narrative. For both authors, the final frontier of apocalypse does not lie in the total annihilation of the Earth, but rather in the dismantling of the moral, political, symbolic, and aesthetic codes through which the world has traditionally been experienced and understood. While *The Last Man* and *Oryx and Crake* depict the collapse of human civilization as we continue to conceive it today, it is in the formal configuration of the apocalyptic text – its landscape, temporal experience, and emotional atmosphere – that a compelling vision of devastation emerges as immersive and transformative. The process of erosion to which the reader bears witness in these novels is initiated by a shared narrative catalyst: that of epidemic infection. In Shelley, an unspecified plague spreads with cosmic inevitability across the 21st and 22nd century; in Atwood, the setting shifts to a near-future scenario in which a bioengineered virus, deliberately released by Crake, eradicates *nearly* the entire human species[4]. In both cases, the infection infiltrates the protagonists' everyday reality, transfiguring the known world into a radically altered and increasingly hostile environment.

[4] It is worth underscoring the structural and thematic interdependence between the first and second volumes of the *MaddAddam* trilogy – a connection that Atwood herself has emphasized on multiple occasions, referring to the two novels as "two chapters of the same book" (2011: 93). The transition from *Oryx and Crake* to *The Year of the Flood* marks a significant narrative shift, as the voice of the narrator bifurcates, revealing the survival of two other human characters, Toby and Ren. However, *Oryx and Crake* is conceived explicitly around the paradigm of the last man and engages directly with the existential implications associated with that figure. Atwood constructs the entire framework of the first volume around the radical isolation of its protagonist: at no point does Snowman encounter another verifiably human being, rendering his solitude absolute and thematically central. It is precisely this configuration – of total isolation, of testimonial burden and ontological liminality – that forms the foundation upon which the subsequent volumes elaborate and complicate the narrative. The layered perspectives and broader survival networks introduced in *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam* do not undermine this initial premise, but rather expand upon it, offering a polyphonic meditation on extinction, memory, and the possibility of re-worlding.

Following a romantic logic, the epidemic in Shelley's novel unfolds with chaotic inevitability. There is no possibility of halting its advance or discerning its origins; humanity is rendered powerless in the face of an intangible force that corrodes all forms of organized life. As Kari E. Lokke underlines:

> Whereas most nineteenth-century versions of the "last man" theme represent the end of the human race at the hands of transcendent cosmic or divine forces that also destroy the earth itself, Shelley's humanity succumbs to the plague in the face of vigorous and blooming nature utterly indifferent to its fate. (2003: 117)

The resulting post-apocalyptic landscape is that of a hollowed-out Europe, where cities are transformed into silent necropolises and nature – no longer constrained by human activity – reclaims its dominance. The depictions of depopulated urban spaces, overrun by forests and wild animals, are suffused with pervasive melancholy, reflecting a disenchanted sensibility. In portraying Europe as a continent reduced to ruins, Shelley engages a principle that Olivia Sutton (2023) defines as "the emasculation of glory": the plague emerges as a blind and, crucially, anonymous force, devoid of moral purpose, and instrumental in dismantling the inherited structures of political and religious meaning:

> I entered with pleasure its wide and grassy streets. All, it is true, pictured the excess of desolation; yet I loved to find myself in those spots which had been the abode of my fellow creatures. I delighted to traverse street after street, to look up at all the tall houses, and repeat to myself, once they contained beings similar to myself – I was not always the wretch I am now. (455)

The ruins of cities such as London, Paris, Naples, Rome, Athens, and – in the cited passage – the Italian city of Forlì, no longer function as relics of the past; they foreshadow a disquieting horizon for the human condition, becoming emblems of a non-future. The landscape ceases to serve as an impregnable repository of memory, and instead becomes a symbol of the loss of all cultural and theological reference points. In Shelley's text, one can thus discern a form of architectural elegy that unfolds around the cities of the dead. The Europe that Verney traverses in the third volume of the novel is a landscape of absence. Human life endures only in its architectural remnants, traces that do not speak of destruction but of abandonment, generating, in the protagonist, a profound sense of estrangement.

> Mingled grass and corn grew in her plains, the unpruned vines threw their luxuriant branches around the elms. The grapes, overripe, had fallen on the ground, or hung purple, or burnished green, among the red and yellow leaves. (430)

And again:

> Winter has come again; and the gardens of Rome have lost their leaves – the sharp air comes over the Campagna, and has driven its brute inhabitants to take up their abode in the many dwellings of the deserted city – frost has suspended the gushing fountains – and Trevi has stilled her eternal music. I had made a rough calculation, aided by the stars, by which I endeavoured to ascertain the first day of the new year. In the out-worn age, the Sovereign Pontiff was used to go in solemn pomp, and mark the renewal of the year by driving a nail in the gate of the temple of Janus. On that day, I ascended St. Peter's, and carved on its topmost stone the aera 2100, last year of the world!
>
> My only companion was a dog, a shaggy fellow, half water and half shepherd's dog, whom I found tending sheep in the Campagna. (467)

This passage may be read as the culminating expression of the poetics of ruin that permeates Shelley's novel. The parallel between the traditional ritual of the Pontiff and Verney's self-appointed, iconoclastic gesture marks a transition from a codified and collective liturgy to a solitary and ironically despairing act of commemoration, one in which the subject suspends the renewal of time and instead marks its end: the last man's gesture, unlike the Pope's ritual affirmation of cyclical continuity in the Christian calendar, signals the closure of human history. The function of this deed is twofold: Shelley's elegiac sublime is never singular or pure, but instead oscillates between commemoration and erasure. Verney's perception is shaped by the semantic void that surrounds him: what strikes him is not ruin in its material dimension, but the collapse of meaning itself, the impossibility of assigning purpose, function, or destiny to space. Rome is no longer *caput mundi*, but the cradle of the sacred and imperial relic, emptied of its symbolic force. Urban ruins thus become the most conspicuous manifestation of historical suspension, where the linearity of time is disrupted. Shelley's plague is directly responsible for this rupture, foreclosing any possibility of collective redemption or utopian regeneration by unravelling the temporal continuum itself: the post-apocalyptic condition gives rise to an expanded and suspended temporality, unfolding into an oppressive, continuous present in which the very possibility of collective futurity is foreclosed. As a result, the last man inhabits a mode of survival devoid of agency, marked by a form of ontological stasis. His existence is reduced to a state of perpetual endurance.

Parallel to the melancholy trajectory of *The Last Man*, the post-apocalyptic landscape portrayed in *Oryx and Crake* emerges as the result of a violent and irretrievable reconfiguration. Whereas Shelley envisions a world in which the plague erases human presence while leaving the natural world largely intact, Atwood

constructs an environment in which nature itself has been genetically modified and exists inextricably linked to human intervention. Also, the devastation depicted in Atwood's work originates from the convergence of biogenetic technologies and capitalist logics, which have progressively transformed animal and plant life into marketable assets (DeFalco 2017: 434). The landscape she envisions takes the form of a hybrid ecosystem in constant flux, marked by a disquieting and paradoxical coexistence of technological remnants and transgenic life forms[5]:

> Also the rakunks were nuisance, scuffing through the leaves and sniffing at his toes, nosing around him as if he were already garbage; and one morning he'd woken to find three pigoons gazing in at him through the plastic. (38)

Urban collapse gives way to the unchecked proliferation of hybrid species – symbols of the irreversible contamination of natural systems. Whereas Shelley's nature offers symbolic refuge to Lionel Verney, Atwood presents a form of vegetation that is unstable in its essence, both generative and threatening:

> The buildings that didn't burn or explode are still standing, though the botany is thrusting itself through every crack. Given time it will fissure the asphalt, topple the walls, push aside the roofs. Some kind of vine is growing everywhere, draping the windowsills, climbing in through the broken windows and up the bars and grillwork. Soon this district will be a thick tangle of vegetation. (221-222)

This can be defined as a "post-natural" environment shaped by a warped evolutionary process and marked by its resistance to containment or recuperation. Snowman wanders through a vegetation that demands not only physical adaptation but also epistemological renegotiation of the human's position in the world. In his solitary movement through this altered landscape, he witnesses how the remnants of the former civilization, advertisements, brand names, and consumer goods, persist only as incoherent and unreadable fragments, unintelligible to the Crakers[6] and, more broadly, to the newly emerging world:

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[5] *Oryx and Crake* contains numerous references to genetically engineered organisms, created through the combination of DNA from different animal species to produce new creatures with targeted traits. Among these are the *pigoons* (pigs designed for the cultivation of human organisms); the *rakunks* (hybrids between raccoons and skunks, developed as domesticated pets); and the *wolvogs* (wolf-dog crosses, engineered as security animals and rendered exceptionally dangerous by their behavioural design).

[6] The Crakers, designed by Crake to be optimally adapted to the newly engineered ecosystem, embody the ultimate attempt to produce an improved species, one that purges of the traits

> Once the rain has slowed to a drizzle and the rumbles of thunder have receded, he slogs back to his cement-slab cache to collect the empty beer bottles. Then he makes his way to a jagged concrete overhang that was once part of a bridge. Beneath it there's a triangular orange sign with the black silhouette of a man shovelling. Men at Work, that used to mean. Strange to think of the endless labour, the digging, the hammering, the carving, the lifting, the drilling, day by day, year by year, century by century; and now the endless crumbling that must be going on everywhere. Sandcastles in the wind. (4445)

In this context, ruin no longer serves as evidence of human decline; it becomes the site of an ambiguous proliferation. Atwood's last man survives within a landscape that continues to reinvent – both formally and semantically – the conditions of habitation. For this reason, in *Oryx and Crake*, the loss of civilization is not mourned so much as met with a profound sense of powerlessness before a future in which the very disappearance of the human becomes an act of ecological resistance – an extreme form of care that is, paradoxically, profoundly unnatural. As Gerry Canavan argues, this ambivalence aligns closely with the logic of *deep ecology*[7] which, at its most radical, advocates for an ecological footprint so minimal that it borders on voluntary human extinction (2012: 150). In this light, the figure of the last man becomes entwined with a catastrophic but potentially redemptive vision, in which extinction itself is not an end but the only remaining gesture capable of interrupting capitalism's destructive momentum and reopening space for nonhuman life to flourish. Moreover, the process of environmental recovery offers Snowman no consolation, as it unfolds within a setting in which ontological hierarchies have been overturned, leaving the human subject as a semantic remnant, positioned at the periphery of the narrative.

Reconsidering the concept of ecophobia as articulated by Estok, the cultural aversion to the unpredictable demands of nature provides a compelling interpretative framework for understanding the metamorphosis of the apocalyptic landscape and its ideological function. In both texts, the destruction of humanity

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the scientist deemed as responsible for the downfall of civilization: violence, hierarchical structures, environmental destruction etc.

7 Originating with the work of Arne Dekke Eide Næss (1989), deep ecology is an environmental philosophy that advocates a fundamental shift in human consciousness, emphasizing the intrinsic value of all living beings regardless of their utility to human needs. It calls for a deep restructuring of modern societies to align with ecological principles, promoting biocentric equality and recognition of the interconnectedness of all forms of life (also see Næss – Drengson – Devall 2008).

is not the sole trauma, but rather a pivotal rupture aimed at destabilizing anthropocentrism and the presumed supremacy of the human over the biosphere. From *The Last Man* to *Oryx and Crake*, the nature of this rupture evolves: while Shelley articulates an ontological form of ecophobia, Atwood's ecophobia emerges as systemic and posthuman, shaped as a critical response to neoliberal capitalist polices. In *The Last Man*, the plague appears to act without discernible motive or moral agenda, while representations of nature continue to convey a sense of unaltered majesty, almost sublime in its indifference to human fate. For this reason, Shelley's ecophobia operates on an existential level: the human subject is revealed as inherently fragile, unable to survive without the scaffolding of collective structures, and ultimately incapable of assimilating the implications of its own decentering within the broader logic of evolution.

> O happy earth, and happy inhabitants of earth! A stately palace has God built for you, O man! and worthy are you of dwelling! Behold the verdant carpet spread at your feet, and the azure canopy above; the fields of earth which generate and nurture all things, and the track of heaven, which contains and clasps all things. Now, at this evening hour, at the period of repose and reflection, methinks all hearts breathe one hymn of love and thanksgiving, and we, like priests of old on the mountain-tops, give a voice to their sentiment. (74-75)

This passage exposes the underlying enthusiasm of the anthropocentric worldview that regards nature as a divine gift destined for human use. Anticipating the modern ecological sensibility, Shelley's ecophobia emerges as a direct consequence of the unmasking of this illusion, assuming the contours of metaphysical solitude: natural beauty and order not only persist as humanity approaches extinction, but appear, paradoxically, to thrive in its absence. It is within this indifference that the sense of estrangement takes root, a defining feature of the Romantic form of fear directed toward the Other. The paradigm is preserved in Atwood, albeit in a revised form. Crake approaches the biosphere as a laboratory at his disposal and treats biology itself as a material subject to design:

> Every so often there's a more open space – the remains of a drive-in campsite, with picnic table and one of those outdoor-barbecue fireplaces, though nobody used them very much once it got so warm and began to rain every afternoon. He comes upon one now, fungi sprouting from the decaying table. Off to the side, from what is probably a glade where the tents and trailers used to be set up, he can hear laughter and singing, and shouts of admiration and encouragement.
>
> There must be a mating going on, a rare-enough occasion among the people: Crake had worked out the numbers, and had decreed that once every three years

> per female was more than enough. There'll be the standard quintuplet, four men and the woman in heat. Her condition will be obvious to all from the bright-blue colour of her buttocks and abdomen – a trick of variable pigmentation filched from the baboons, with a contribution from the expandable chromosphores of the octopus. As Crake used to say, *Think of an adaptation, any adaptation, and some animal somewhere will have thought of it first.* Since it's only the blue tissue and the pheromones released by it that stimulate the males, there's no more unrequited love these days, no more thwarted lust; no more shadow between the desire and the act. (164-165)

As this passage reveals, Crake's genetic intervention directly impacts the intimate and social dimensions of sexuality and reproduction. The reproductive system designed for the Crakers, intended to eliminate inefficient emotions such as unrequited desire or jealousy, is the product of an extreme rationalization of life. In this framework, sexuality is no longer associated with affection or spontaneity but reduced to a biological mechanism activated by visual and chemical cues. The programmed control of the reproductive cycle, limited to one instance every three years per female, reflects the deliberate attempt to eliminate emotional unpredictability in favour of a planned, functional, and ultimately dehumanizing order. Although this system is framed as "natural" through its invocation of animal traits (such as those of baboons or octopuses), it is profoundly unnatural in its negation of the affective and cultural complexity that has historically accompanied human reproduction. The paradox lies in the fact that, in attempting to return to an imagined state of natural purity, Crake has devised a system that excludes precisely what renders reproduction human: desire, love, memory, and historicity. This vision evokes, albeit from an opposite perspective, *Le Dernier Homme* by Cousin de Grainville, in which reproduction is not controlled but rendered impossible. Humanity, condemned to extinction, is fated to sterility. In both cases, procreation becomes the object of conceptual manipulation that removes the generative act from the domain of free will and existential significance. Whereas in *Le Dernier Homme*, the end of fertility is portrayed as melancholic condemnation of humanity, in Atwood, reproduction itself is stripped of human meaning and transformed into a technical operation. Both worlds articulate the failure of humanity to manage its generative capacity responsibly: in Grainville, through resignation to extinction; in Atwood, through the illusion of posthuman perfection. In this sense, the controlled fertility of the Crakers is as dehumanizing as the terminal infertility portrayed in Grainville's proto-apocalyptic novel.

In *Oryx and Crake*, it becomes clear how the human downfall is the product of technological arrogance, and catastrophe becomes the expression of a technocratic, inverted ecophobia. As in *The Last Man*, the alterity of wilderness and the autonomy it asserts are categorically rejected. Nevertheless, despite its elegiac tone, Shelley's narrative preserves an idea of natural alterity capable of functioning as a moral mirror. Although profoundly isolated, Lionel Verney addresses nature as the witness to his fate: the sea, the mountains, and the surrounding vegetation are present as indifferent yet enduring symbols. In contrast, Atwood offers no trace of nostalgia for a lost and pristine nature. Its landscape is a semiotic swamp in which irretrievable cultural fragments are entangled with genetic artificialities. This composite environment exemplifies what Stacy Alaimo defines *trans-corporeality* (2010: 15), the ontological impossibility, fully realized in the *MaddAddam* universe, of separating human bodies from the material systems in which they are embedded. Snowman is contaminated, both physically and mentally, by this environment and is presented to the reader as the bearer of a residual body, a liminal subject compelled to negotiate his identity within a world that has erased all stable human referents. Yet Atwood's narrative takes this logic a step further: civilisation, having surrendered to excess, generates a form of bio-artificial life that ultimately proves just as uncontrollable. As Timothy Morton observes, within the context of the Anthropocene, the very opposition between humanity and its surroundings is rendered meaningless, as the constructed environment now exceeds and permeates the human subject (2016: 81). Within this framework, ecophobia emerges as the symbolic condition of a post-anthropocentric age, characterized by disorientation, alienation, and anxiety in the face of a world no longer governed by human laws or expectations.

Shelley and Atwood, though approaching the question from distinct historical and philosophical vantage points, converge in their critique of humanist ideology. In Shelley, the last man bears witness to human fragility against the backdrop of nature's immutable continuity; in Atwood, this figure – inflected with posthuman nuances – inhabits a chaotic environment shaped by centuries of ecophobic logic, in which the original concept of nature has become irretrievable. The evolution of the apocalyptic landscape from Shelley to Atwood reflects a radical transformation in ecophobic affect: from a fear of the sublime to a fear of the synthetic, from eco-anxiety to systemic eco-terror. In both authors, the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic landscape is not a mere stage for human action, but emerges as an active agent – a living, mutating, and opaque space that returns to humanity the tragic reflection of its own *hybris*.

3. The last word: Narrating the resistance

As previously noted, in the post-apocalyptic imaginaries of Shelley and Atwood, survival emerges as a deeply layered process in which the endurance of the last man is inextricably bound to the act of narration. Their protagonists confront the collapse of civilization through storytelling, seeking thereby to endow knowledge with a lasting form capable of withstanding the disintegration of social structures. Within the ontological misalignment that follows the apocalyptic rupture, the transmission of personal experience becomes a crucial gesture of resilience, reaffirming the role of narrative in preserving continuity.

Through the active labour of storytelling, both Verney and Snowman attempt to maintain a form of subjective coherence that mediates between traumatic experience and the fragile persistence of identity and memory. Their narratives expose a singular dimension of storytelling that presupposes an absolute solitude, a solitude that belongs not only to the isolated body, but also to their condition as subjects adrift in worlds stripped of semantic correspondence. Verney wanders through remnants of a still-recognizable past to reconstruct meaning. Snowman, by contrast, moves within a de-narrativized environment, attempting to establish communication with the Crakers, creatures devoid of collective memory, with whom the construction of a shared cultural legacy proves profoundly difficult, if not altogether unattainable.

Lisa Hopkins (2009) observes that the motivating principle behind Verney's narrative lies in the desire to leave behind a record of lived experience, despite the awareness that no actual audience may remain. In *The Last Man*, Shelley frames the last man's account as a secret history, discovered in the form of scattered pages within the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl. This framing device imparts a destabilizing structure to the novel, rendering the relationship between narrator and reader complex and ambiguous: it remains unclear whether what is being read constitutes history or prophecy, a formal ambiguity that unsettles any linear conception of time.

From the earliest pages, however, the text affirms the notion that memory might survive the end of humanity through the medium of writing. The hope that a "tender offspring of the re-born world" (437) might one day read these pages makes explicit the preservative function of Verney's narrative: writing becomes a gesture toward symbolic continuity in a world devoid of institutions and human presence. In this sense, Shelley's text functions as a kind of time capsule. Verney himself initially succumbs to despair, lamenting the futility of the undertaking:

> To read were futile – to write, vanity indeed. The earth, late wide circus for the display of dignified exploits, vast theatre for a magnificent drama, now presented a vacant space, an empty stage – for actor or spectator there was no longer aught to say or hear. (308)

Ultimately, however, the last man discovers in narration a form of consolation and testimony. His account reconstructs a lost humanity through the remembrance of emotional bonds, political upheavals, and personal griefs that would otherwise vanish with him. Writing thus becomes both a testament and an act of emotional resistance. In addressing an imagined reader, Verney bridges the gap between his solitary present and an uncertain future. Much like the ruined cities, the text functions as a reliquary of collective memory: having buried his wife, Verney symbolically buries his narrative as well, entrusting it to time in the hope that "eyes read these pages." (437).

Turning to *Oryx and Crake*, language becomes flexible, performative, and continually reinvented through an oral, mythopoeic mode that responds to the trauma of transformed subjectivity. Snowman narrates the aftermath of civilization in the present tense, while simultaneously recalling the world that preceded its collapse. In her analysis of language in the first volume of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, Mundler observes that:

> certain phrases […] echo the older text eerily: "these are things from before", "before things got so serious"; "most of the bugs have now been ironed out. The language of "the time before is constantly played and redesigned in order at once to evoke and reject, to name and deny, setting up an ironic-parodic discourse with the "real", that is, the extratextual, world. A fresh battery of neologisms designates the new vision of America – Ultratext, CorpSecorps – while lists of obsolete words from "before" are elegiacally invoked. (2004: 90)

In this way, Atwood constructs a rift between the before and after, shifting language – as traditionally understood by humans, from a collective to a private register. The juxtaposition of archaic and newly invented terms creates a self-reflexive tension that challenges the stability of both linguistic meaning and narrative structure. This interplay foregrounds language as a constructed medium, simultaneously evoking the cultural loss of the pre-apocalyptic world and exposing the fragility of communication in a radically transformed posthuman context. Across both novels, the protagonists' narrative strategies in response to catastrophe reflect two divergent conceptions of time and history. Snowman acknowledges that language itself has nearly perished alongside humanity, leading him to fear a final semantic dispersion that would coincide with his own disappearance:

> But there was no longer any comfort in the words. There was nothing in them. It no longer delighted Jimmy to possess these small collections of letters that other people had forgotten about. It was like having his own baby teeth in a box (261).

From this perspective, the true turning point occurs when Snowman begins to reconceive narration as a social duty: the last man begins to invent mythologies and elaborates cosmogonies for the Crakers, thereby laying the foundation for a new symbolic order. As Parsons demonstrates, Jimmy comes to regard language as a tool for cultural continuity. Prior to rejoining the Crakers, Snowman resolves to "pass on all [his] words" (339) and to "leave them with a few words to remember" (366). Alone, he concedes, he cannot sustain the life of language; but within a community, he discovers a "renewed purpose in the acts of preservation offered by language" (Parson 2023: 6). Atwood thus reconfigures narration as a generative force essential to survival: Snowman must assume the roles of storyteller and educator in order to construct a symbolic framework amid the ruins. She extends this logic by intricately linking ecology and language, drawing a persistent parallel between species extinction and linguistic extinction.

A pivotal moment occurs in the nighttime scene where Snowman, cast in the role of a struck prophet, recounts to the Crakers the mythologized origins of Oryx and Crake. Within this reimagined narrative, Oryx emerges as a figure of compassion, Crake as one of destruction, and Snowman himself assumes the role of a retroactive prophet. Through the articulation of this narrated cosmogony, Snowman constructs for the Crakers a form of cultural and identity-based continuity, transmitting the moral legacies of a lost human past:

> The Children of Oryx, the Children of Crake. He'd had to think of something. Get your story straight, keep it simple, don't falter: this used to be the expert advice given by lawyers to criminals in the dock. *Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk*. (96)

In this pseudo-Genesis account, Snowman constructs a foundational narrative to explain the structure of the post-apocalyptic world to the Crakers. The image of the "egg full of words" encapsulates the central theme of language as a rare and

potent resource, underscoring the essential role of storytelling in imbuing the new reality with meaning and structure. Atwood emphasizes that mythmaking becomes, for Snowman, his only survival strategy in the face of humanity's annihilation. He repeats ancient stories and revives obsolete words, finding comfort in preserving what seemed irrevocably lost. The fact that Crake failed to eradicate from the Crakers their intrinsic need for myth, religion, or art, despite the deliberate engineering of their minds, reveals that narrative and language are integral to the very condition of human survival. In this light, language emerges as an ethical device: through the stories, Oryx embodies compassion while Crake represents human culpability, thereby granting the nascent community a form of normative memory.

In both novels, narration functions as a means of maintaining symbolic continuity in the aftermath of annihilation. Shelley's narrator preserves the emotional and cultural residues of a vanished world, resisting the pull of oblivion. Verney's prose becomes an archive of humanity; even as he declares writing to be an act of vanity, he continues, paradoxically, to write. Snowman, by contrast, deploys storytelling to reconstruct social bonds and reinvent meaning. He generates myths so that the very fabric of the narrative itself becomes the scaffolding of a new posthuman society. *Oryx and Crake* presents Snowman's narration as a conscious ethical gesture. In the end, he comes to recognize that language outlives any individual life; by teaching and narrating, he hopes to endow his world with something of the richness humanity once possessed.

Conceptually, both Shelley and Atwood portray narration as a post-apocalyptic mnemonic apparatus. Language and storytelling become strategies of survival that are both ecological and cultural. As Parsons and Hopkins have shown, when human institutions collapse, narration serves as the medium through which new subjectivities are forged and the memories, along with the errors, of the old world are preserved. In *The Last Man*, narration becomes the preservation of a human "before", anchoring selfhood in the fragments of history. In *Oryx and Crake*, narration becomes transformation, enabling a transcendent "word man" to project identity into a horizon of tentative hope. In both cases, characters engage in storytelling as a means of constructing symbolic continuity. Ultimately, Shelley and Atwood attest the enduring power of narrative to preserve meaning in the face of love, loss, and existential threat. Language itself emerges as the final living organism, carrying human thought forward through the desolate wasteland.

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LAURA TODESCHINI

Università degli Studi di Bergamo
laura.todeschini@unibg.it
ORCID code: 0009-0009-7907-2122