

Marisa Žele*

Siren Song to the Last Man: Mary Shelley and the Loss of the World¹

A spacious cave, within its farmost part, / was hew'd and fashion'd by laborious art. / Thro' the hill's hollow sides: before the place, / a hundred doors a hundred entries grace; / as many voices issue, and the sound / of Sibyl's words as many times rebound. / Now to the mouth they come. Aloud she cries: / "This is the time; enquire your destinies. He comes; behold the god!" / Thus while she said, / (And shiv'ring at the sacred entry stay'd), / Her color chang'd; her face was not the same, / and hollow groans from her deep spirit came. / Her hair stood up; convulsive rage possess'd, / her trembling limbs, and heav'd her lab'ring breast. / Greater than humankind she seem'd to look, / and with an accent more than mortal spoke. / Her staring eyes with sparkling fury roll; / when all the god came rushing on her soul.²

Mary Shelley opens her novel *The Last Man* with an introductory account of how, during her visit to Naples, she came across the writings from the future that she now presents in collected and restored form. She tells of how on 8 December 1818 she and her companion set out across the Gulf of Naples to the half-submerged ancient city of Baiae to see the archaeological sites in its vicinity. During their visit to Lake Avernus, which lies above Baiae and near the ancient Greek colony of Cumae, they descended into a nearby cave and, after long wandering in the dark and water, abandoned by their Italian guides, found themselves in the legendary cave of the Cumaean Sibyl – the very cave that Virgil's sixth book of the *Aeneid* had inspired them to seek out.³

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The long-forgotten path has left the cave of the famous ancient prophetess asleep for ages, and with it a multitude of the famous Sibyl's leaves inscribed

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² Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. J. Dryden, London, Penguin Books Ltd, 1997, Book VI, p. 148.

³ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, New York, Oxford University Press, Inc., 2008, p. 5.

* ZRC SAZU, Institute of Philosophy, Ljubljana, Slovenia | ORCID: 0000-0002-4540-8208 | marisa.zele@zrc-sazu.si

with prophecies. Covered by a dome and illuminated by only a ray of light penetrating through the dense vegetation from the upper pastures, the cave preserved the Sibyl's writings in their original form for all that time, until Shelley came across them and, together with an unnamed companion, set out to collect them, translate them from the many ancient and modern languages they were written in, and learn their contents. When her companion – a possible allusion to Percy Shelley, who tragically drowned four years before the novel's publication – abandons her in this endeavour, Mary Shelley assumes the role not only of archaeologist and restorer but, above all, of the unraveller of ancient prophecies, both fulfilled and unfulfilled, focusing the main body of her work on a single extensive prophecy in which the Cumaean Sibyl predicts the end of humanity in the year 2100. In the preface, she writes:

I present the public with my latest discoveries in the slight Sibylline pages. Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form. But the main substance rests on the truths contained in these poetic rhapsodies, and the divine intuition which the Cumaean damsel obtained from heaven ⁴

Thus the reader is introduced to the story of the endling Lionel Verney, the last of the human race, who, after the relentless march of a deadly plague, finds himself alone in a deserted Rome, where he decides to write the last book, the final human's attempt to capture the world, before it leaves him behind, as it has left behind all the other creations, achievements, and reflections of a man, now gathering dust in the great libraries, forgotten by a world where there is no one left to read them. Like Shelley, Verney includes a dedication in his autobiographical work in which he recounts his personal history and the events that have led to the gradual extinction of the human species over the past seven years, but that is no longer truly intended for anyone, as he himself states in the hopelessness of despair and utter loneliness:

I also will write a book, I cried – for whom to read? – to whom dedicated? And then, with silly flourish (what so capricious and childish as despair?) I wrote,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

DEDICATION
TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD
SHADOWS, ARISE AND READ YOUR FALL!
BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE
LAST MAN.⁵

Thus, at the end of the book, we learn that we have been reading the memoirs of someone who has been in the future all along, and that none of what he describes has (yet) come to pass. With the last man writing the last book, Shelley succeeds in bringing the specific temporal structure of her novel to closure – even though Verney’s book is a record from the future, we are actually reading the unfulfilled prophecy of the Cumaean Sibyl, who in ancient times somehow managed to intercept the coming history of the not-yet-living Verney, the last man, which Shelley finds, revises, and publishes as her third novel in 1826. The image of the dusty and forgotten cave of the Sibyl, awakened from its long slumber by visitors, coincides with the image of the empty and deserted towns through which Verney passes on his way to Rome, and on the walls of which he leaves messages for anyone who might see them and join him in Rome (“Verney, the last of the race of Englishmen, had [*sic*]⁶ taken up his abode in Rome. Friend, come! I wait for thee! *Deh, vieni! ti aspetto!*”⁷). He waits there for a year, and when no one appears, he decides to leave the ancient city behind with all its forgotten relics, including his book, and departs. For a being of solitude, Shelley writes, is a wandering being,⁸ and Verney ultimately decides to follow suit:

And then – no matter where – the oozy caves, and soundless depths of ocean may be my dwelling, before I accomplish this long-drawn voyage, or the arrow of disease find my heart as I float singly on the weltering Mediterranean; or, in some place I touch at, I may find what I seek – a companion; or if this may not be – to endless time, decrepid and grey headed – youth already in the grave with those I love – the lone wanderer will still unfurl his sail, and clasp the tiller – and, still

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

⁶ Some of the citations herein contain grammatical forms and spelling that might be deemed archaic.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 468.

obeying the breezes of heaven, for ever round another and another promontory, anchoring in another and another bay, still ploughing seedless ocean [...].⁹

This does not mean that Verney does not believe that he holds the status of the last man. He leaves Rome at the end of the novel, not out of naiveté or a deeply smouldering hope that this is not the case, but because he realizes that there is nothing left for him to do in this deserted world. As the last human being, he can only be a wandering creature in a world where humanity no longer exists to maintain its significance or in any way justify or assert its mere presence therein. It is perhaps for this reason that death as such is void of any real solace or salvation for him, and why he does not choose it. At a certain point, he seems to realize that in this world even the death of the last man, when it happens, will not be an epochal event, but a completely silent, unnoticed, and unlamented event that will seamlessly blend into a much larger universal flow and disappear – and that there is therefore no point in seeking it out too hastily.

It is death, Verney says, that will be welcomed as a friend, unless by some lucky chance his fate is reversed and he feels again his “heart beat near the heart of another like to me”¹⁰ – one who may have survived the deadly plague as he did. This possibility of re-encounter is evoked several times, but it only seems to take its place when Verney tries to portray his utter loneliness with this relentless longing, rather than actually conveying hope that it exists as a real possibility. For he longs for something inscribed in irreversibility – for those who have left him, and for a world that no longer exists and will never return. With this inscription, Verney concludes his book and sets out to sea:

Neither hope nor joy are my pilots – restless despair and fierce desire of change lead me on. I long to grapple with danger, to be excited by fear, to have some task, however slight or voluntary, for each day’s fulfilment. I shall witness all the variety of appearance, that the elements can assume – I shall read fair augury in the rainbow – menace in the cloud – some lesson or record dear to my heart in everything. Thus around the shores of deserted earth, while the sun is high, and

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the moon waxes or wanes, angels, the spirits of the dead, and the ever-open eye of the Supreme, will behold the tiny bark, freighted with Verney the LAST MAN.¹¹

The moment when Verney sails out alone across the vast sea in a small boat, in the shadow of this terrible thought – that he is indeed alone – is reminiscent of the biblical patriarch Noah surviving the Flood on his ark – except, of course, that Noah is not alone and that he and his family successfully continue the human lineage. The allusion to Noah is strong as we follow Verney onto the boat in which he lands after the deluge of the plague, and especially as he meaningfully alludes to the rainbow as a good omen in his final entry. For it is the rainbow¹² in the Old Testament that is the sign of the covenant between God and man that the past flood was the last and never to be repeated again.

And God said: “This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”¹³

In sum, God promises Noah that never again will there be a flood that destroys the earth, and sets up the rainbow as a sign and reminder of this promise.¹⁴ However, as Morton D. Paley reminds us at the end of his analysis of *The Last Man*,¹⁵ this analogy between Noah and Verney that Shelley draws is at the same time quite ironic in all its suggestiveness, given that there is a fundamental difference between the two. Namely, there is another divine commandment imposed on Noah that Verney, in his solitude, cannot possibly fulfil while Noah does – the commandment to continue the human race:

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

¹² New King James Version (NKJV), Genesis 9:13.

¹³ NKJV, Genesis 9:12–16.

¹⁴ NKJV, Genesis 9:11.

¹⁵ Morton D. Paley, “Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*: Apocalypse Without Millennium”, *Keats-Shelley Review*, 4 (1/1989), p. 25.

And as for you, be fruitful and multiply; Bring forth abundantly in the earth and multiply in it.¹⁶

If Noah is thus a figure of continuity and the safe landing of his ark after the Flood is the point of a new beginning for mankind, Shelly's Verney, on the other hand, is a pure figure of finality and his small boat the point of the end rather than the beginning, which is probably the reason for some of the unsparing criticism the novel received when it was first published. The author was repeatedly criticized for creating a work with a theme of finitude that was described as downright sickening¹⁷ and for writing "a monstrous fable,"¹⁸ "a product of a diseased imagination and a polluted taste,"¹⁹ or rather "another raw head and bloody bones."²⁰ A narrative that countered the common notion of man as the focal point of the world and, on the contrary, portrayed him as a rather ephemeral and, for the world itself, rather insignificant and easily forgettable creature, was clearly eerie enough to provoke such revulsion among literary critics of the time. After all, Shelley's protagonist has no continuation in his posterity, and as the last of his kind, he cannot save humanity. He can only be a witness to its demise, which he describes in great detail in his book, and as a witness he persists only as a confirmation of its lack in the world. So it is we, as his readers, before whose eyes is drawn an image of the end of the old and the emergence of another world in which man simply no longer exists:

A herd of cattle passed along in the dell below, untended, towards their watering place – the grass was rustled by a gentle breeze, and the olive-woods, mellowed into soft masses by the moonlight, contrasted their sea-green with the dark chesnut[sic] foliage. Yes, this is the earth; there is no change – no ruin – no rent made in her verdurous expanse; she continues to wheel round and round,

¹⁶ NKJV, Genesis 9:7.

¹⁷ "Review of New Books", *The Literary Gazette and the Journal of the Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences*, 474, 18 February, 1826, pp. 102–103. Available at https://archive.org/details/sim_literary-gazette_1826-02-18_474/mode/2up?q=last+man&view=theater.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁹ *The Monthly Review*, 1 (March 1826), p. 335. Available at https://archive.org/details/sim_the-monthly-review_1826-03_1/page/334/mode/2up.

²⁰ *The Literary Magnet, Or, Monthly Journal of the Belles Lettres*, 1 (1826), p. 56. Available at https://archive.org/details/sim_literary-magnet-or-monthly-journal-of-the-belles-lettres_1826-01_1/page/n55/mode/2up. Here, they refer to Shelley's first masterpiece, *Frankenstein* (1818).

with alternate night and day, through the sky, though man is not her adorning or inhabitant.²¹

The vision of this new world seems almost like something forbidden – and it is precisely in this vision that another thread is woven that connects Verney to Noah. If one glances at the title page of *The Last Man*, one recognizes a certain repetition of something that also occurs in Shelley’s first novel²² and manifests itself in the form of the incorporation of a quotation from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* – it may in this way already serve as a warning of the prophecy of the Sibyl that the reader has just gotten his hands on:

Let no man seek
Henceforth to be foretold what shall befall
Him or his children.²³

These are the words spoken by Adam after the coming of the Flood is revealed to him, where he beholds “the end of all thy offspring, end so sad.”²⁴ He regrets looking into the future, and then goes on to say that there is no one (yet) whom he can warn of the terrible things to come. In desperation he then implores the Archangel Michael to tell him nevertheless whether this is the end that is destined for mankind.²⁵ The archangel then tells him how the human race survived the Flood thanks to Noah’s Ark, at which Adam rejoices and proclaims:

O thou, who future things canst represent
As present, Heavenly Instructor, I revive
At this last sight, assured that Man shall live,
With all the creatures, and their seed preserve.²⁶

²¹ Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 459.

²² On the first page of her 1818 novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, we may find Milton’s Adam asking: “Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man?” (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, London, Penguin Books Ltd, 1996, Book X, 743–744, p. 259).

²³ Book XI, 770–72, *ibid.*, p. 291.

²⁴ Book XI, 755, *ibid.*, p. 290.

²⁵ Book XI, 785–786, *ibid.*, p. 291.

²⁶ Book XI, 870–873, *ibid.*, p. 293.

In *Paradise Lost*, Adam thus beholds the end of humanity and laments that he is unable to warn anyone about it (“Man is not whom to warn”²⁷). The future is revealed to him as the present, and Shelley incorporates this admonition of the first man into her narrative of the last man – destined to remain alone – further unravelling the leaping temporal structure of her work. Since Lionel Verney wrote his own biography, which we read in *The Last Man*, Shelley reduces herself to the role of an editor who extracts Verney’s work from the “leaves, bark, and other substances”²⁸ where the ancient prophetess inscribed it, and then subtitles it with Adam’s warning – the one Adam could not give to men who got lost in the deluge, but which, through Shelley’s intercession, could be delivered by the Sibyl, who had learned what would happen in 2100, when the “true” end of mankind would come and the only boat left would be the one drifting with the lonely Verney.

The intertwining of the author’s personal life and her work, which has often been regarded as a *roman à clef* – for several parallels can be drawn between the characters and the loved ones she had lost by 1826 – is perhaps most clearly encapsulated in the motif of the boat’s departure. In Verney’s last account before sailing from Rome, the rainbow is mentioned as a harbinger of a happy voyage, a kind of embodiment of the old nautical saying “fair winds and following seas” that would bring the ship to a safe haven. Mary Shelley’s bark motif, however, is closely linked to another motif that is tragic in nature for the one who sets sail, namely the theme of drowning. As for Verney, we know that he considers the rainbow to be a good omen, but we do not know whether he actually lays his eyes on it before he leaves. In addition, there is also an element of divination that suggests some affinity between the author and the Sibyl. For example, Mary Shelley writes in one of her letters that now, less than a year after Percy Shelley drowned aboard his boat Ariel, her earlier writings seem prophetic:

Is not the catastrophe [in Valperga] strangely prophetic? But it seems to me that in what I have hitherto written I have done nothing but prophecy what has arrived

²⁷ Book X, 743-744, Book XI, 777, *ibid.*, p. 291.

²⁸ Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 5.

to. Matilda foretells even many small circumstances most truly – [...] the whole of it is a monument of what now is.²⁹

She is alluding to her second novel, *Valperga* (1823), which was written in 1820, and to the novella *Matilda* (1959), which she composed between 1819–20. In both, she writes of a death in the water – two years before it befalls her husband – and sees herself in retrospect as Matilda, rushing to prevent her father’s suicide at sea while she herself hastens to Pisa to confirm her husband’s demise. A repetition of this theme is apparent in *The Last Man*, where Verney acquires the status of the last man through the loss of his last two companions when the boat in which they were sailing to Athens is caught in a sudden storm,³⁰ and, of course, at the end of the novel when he himself sets off into the unknown. Most likely, judging from all of the other hints Shelley gives us, into his own damp grave, of which he reveries earlier³¹ – however, it does not really matter, because the end, no matter for how long the death of the last man has been postponed, has already come.

It could be said, then, that prophecy – whether found on the leaves buried deep in the Sibyl’s cave, in the revelation of Milton’s Adam, or in Shelley’s own premonition – is central to the story of a very specific end around which all of the novel’s leaps in time are arranged. Verney’s written memoir, delivered to us for reading through prophetic intervention,³² may indeed serve as a warning, but not against the catastrophe that awaits humanity in 2100, but, as Adam laments

²⁹ Shelley’s letter to Maria Gisborne (May 1823). See Mary W. Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Volume I*, B. T. Bennett (ed.), Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, p. 336.

³⁰ “The day passed thus; each moment contained eternity; although when hour after hour had gone by, I wondered at the quick flight of time. Yet even now I had not drunk the bitter potion to the dregs; I was not yet persuaded of my loss; I did not feel in every pulsation, in every nerve, in every thought, that I remained alone of my race, – that I was the LAST MAN.” (Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 446.)

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Prophecy as an intervention in the irreversible, manifests itself in the form of the Sibyl’s interception of Verney’s memory. As Tadej Troha shows in his *Intervencije v nepovratno* [Interventions into the Irreversible], an intervention in the irreversible “is not a gesture of negation and its annulment [of the irreversible], but of its affirmation,” while at the same time, if it is to be enacted, it “must rely on the dimension of the collective.” (Tadej Troha, *Intervencije v nepovratno*, Ljubljana, Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, 2015, pp. 45–46.)

on the title page, against looking into the future. For that is how the passage runs in its entirety:

O visions ill foreseen! Better had I lived ignorant of future, so had borne / My part of evil only, each day's lot / Enough to bear; those now that were dispensed / The burden of many ages on me light / At once, by my foreknowledge gaining birth / Abortive, to torment me, ere their being, / With thought that they must be. Let no man seek / Henceforth to be foretold what shall befall / Him or his children – evil, he may be sure.³³

To whom is Verney writing? The dedication tells us that he dedicates his book to the dead. Yet Verney is not writing in vain – as it turns out, his readership is only temporally displaced – into the past. His readers are us, the unliving. For while it is true that there *will* be no one to read him, that does not mean that there *was* no reader. Verney's memoir, then, is not at all addressed to his descendants, whose nonexistence he for a time despairingly dwells on,³⁴ but to those who precede him. The prophecy of the Cumaean Sibyl thus becomes a premonition of Verney's memory, and due to the role of the soothsayer as mediator between future and past, the last man ultimately gains his readership.

The answer to the question of why Verney writes the book in the first place may lie precisely in the structure of temporality that Shelley develops in her work to address the very particular expectation that man cultivates for the future – to see himself always in it, even if only in the image of his descendant. Within this structure of *anthropocentric expectation*, a descendant functions as a guarantee of reconciliation with an individual finitude insofar as it is replaced by the universal eternity. Shelley, however, strips away this guarantee in her narrative and achieves a kind of superimposition of that romantic sublime that we might have forgotten about as inhabitants of a century Shelley imagined (ironically or perhaps prophetically) as the last, and which suggested a different kind of domination – of the world over man. A world that overwhelms man, marks him, but at the same time remains itself fundamentally untouched by him, whereby Shelley also manages to transcend any human resentment that might have arisen from her personal nostalgia, which permeates her entire futuristic narrative. As a re-

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³³ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book XI, 763–772, pp. 290–291.

³⁴ Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 466.

construction of future annihilation and its admonition, the prophecy does not aim to forestall the coming end – after all, according to Virgil, the Cumaean Sibyl merely reveals what is to come³⁵ without intervening – but rather to enable the possibility of imagining the coming of another world that can only be born through the end.

In this respect, Shelley seems to recognize that the looming end, especially when it appears certain, stirs the idea of a new beginning. Not only that, but as Maurice Blanchot points out in his text *The Apocalypse is Disappointing*,³⁶ it is the idea of the end, of the total annihilation of the world, that produces the possibility of thinking of the world as whole, or rather, that introduces the notion of the world as totality. Blanchot develops his thesis in response to the climate of the Cold War and the ongoing controversy over what the possibility of setting off the atomic bomb actually evokes in thought as he tackles the ideas of power and dominance, universal annihilation, and especially two notions that tend to be used much more generally than they actually are – the world and humankind. Applied to our present context, we can further say that the extinction of humankind in *The Last Man* is not the result of humans as the agents of their own and, above all, collective annihilation, but of the intrusion of an unexpected external factor into the interior – of something which, after all, we have recently experienced collectively ourselves in a “milder” version: the sudden appearance of a deadly disease that is extremely contagious and kills a previously healthy person in less than twenty-four hours. No one but Verney escapes this death, which does not mean that the destruction of humanity has not occurred. It just means that with the survival of the ending there is a remnant left after its end.

For if we look at the first discussion of the coining of this term in *Nature* in 1996, the ending, by its most general definition, is the one who remains as the last part of a whole:

³⁵ “And nearby, in a place apart / –a dark enormous cave– / the Sibyl feared by men / In her the Delian god of prophecy / Inspires uncanny powers of mind and soul / *Disclosing things to come.*” (Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. R. Fitzgerald, New York, Random House, 1989, p. 159.)

³⁶ This is Blanchot’s response to Karl Jaspers’s *The Atomic Bomb and the Future of Man: The Political Conscience of Our Time* (1958). See Maurice Blanchot, “The Apocalypse is Disappointing”, trans. E. Rottenberg, in *Friendship*, W. Hamacher and D. E. Wellbery (eds.), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 101–108.

There is a need for a word in taxonomy, and in medical genealogical, scientific, biological and other literature, that does not occur in the English or any other language. We need a word to designate the last person, animal or other species in *his/her/its lineage*.³⁷

The notion of the endling is therefore always introduced in its relation to the whole. The whole as something that has been produced in its relation to its last part, or, as Blanchot shows, something inaugurated particularly when even the presence of the last is no longer there, as its remnant, but we are confronted with the loss of something that we have only begun to think in its totality under the threat of its loss – as the loss of it all. Loss as the moment when we thus begin to think that what remains after us is simply – nothing. Of course, it is not true that this totality ever existed in concrete form – no, on the contrary, and here lies the disappointment, this totality never existed at all, because it was formed (phantasmatically) only when the light of its loss fell upon it. It was thus created through the production of a certain perspective, that through total destruction we will indeed lose everything, which is why the totality of notions such as “world” or “humanity” and the attached apocalypse that brings them to an end is abstract at best, and disappointing in its absolute emptiness. In this sense, the end is, as Blanchot writes, “an event of enormous size, but enormously empty.”³⁸ And here lies, as Alenka Zupančič puts it in her work on the end, the *paradox of the whole*.³⁹

In the novel, the moment of sighting emptiness is wonderfully set shortly after Verney realizes that he has been left behind. As he slowly makes his way to Rome, he finds himself each night standing in front of a deserted cottage, staring at the closed door without the strength to open it and enter. Thus, he sits for hours on the threshold: “unable to lift the latch, and meet face to face blank desertion within.”⁴⁰ He instead finds refuge outside, for he notices that his loneliness only recedes there. The emptiness lies in the ruins of the old world, while to be in the world is to inhabit a certain fullness of the world that has arisen within

³⁷ Robert M. Webster and Bruce Erickson, “The Last Word?”, *Nature* 380 (1996), p. 386, and further: David Craig, Elaine Andrews, and Mark Smith, “The Last Word”, *Nature*, 381 (1996), p. 272.

³⁸ Blanchot, “Apocalypse is Disappointing”, p. 104.

³⁹ Alenka Zupančič, *Konec*, Ljubljana, Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, 2019, p. 67.

⁴⁰ Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 457.

its loss. This fullness can manifest itself only through the emptiness in which the opening of the world takes place – a world that does not perceive this loss, except for the last man, who lives on as a mere remnant of it. In Shelley’s apocalyptic narrative, true solitude seems to be hidden in confined spaces; a cure for it lies in distance, in stepping away and thus *out* – and in this respect the endling finds himself where man in his *natural state*, of whom Rousseau writes in his *Second Discourse*, might have wandered alone:

I see him sating his hunger beneath an oak, slaking his thirst at the first Stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that supplied his meal, and with that his needs are satisfied.⁴¹

Similarly Verney:

Many nights, through autumnal mists were spread around, I passed under an ilex [oak] – many times I have supped on arbutus berries and chesnuts [*sic*], making a fire, gypsy-like, on the ground – because wild natural scenery reminded me less acutely of my hopeless state of loneliness.⁴²

This brings us to the Hegelian power of negation that Blanchot evokes in relation to understanding the world in its totality through the potentiality of its destruction: “the power of understanding is the absolute power of negation.”⁴³ To understand totality is to be confronted with the thought of its loss – an understanding that only comes through its negation. It is in the confrontation with emptiness, with the loss of all, that the world appears to Verney as whole. Blanchot’s point is not that confronting the emptiness of the end, that is, the lifting of the veil thrown over us by the mystification of the apocalypse (as the *loss of all*), means that we have lost that totality, but rather that the very recognition of the fallaciousness of the existence of the whole that negation brings about opens up the possibility of a “whole” yet to be created.⁴⁴ The thinking of the end brings with it the possibility of creating a new world. And herein lies the

⁴¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses and Essay on the Origin of Languages*, trans. V. Gourevitch, New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1990, p. 142.

⁴² Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 457.

⁴³ Blanchot, “The Apocalypse is Disappointing”, p. 105.

⁴⁴ “The choice is to fight not simply to preserve the world such as it is, but to unite in creating, in forming a world, for the first time...This is not so much about ‘changing the world’, but

message of Verne's prophecy, which it can only make sense to read *now* – in the past, where this possibility is not (yet) lost.

For, as Zupančič shows, two kinds of totality can be thought within the Lacanian differentiation between “all” and “not-all”. While on one hand the very “loss of all” is deceptive insofar as it offers us the idea of a false totality, namely that this “all” ever existed, on the other hand, the “not-all” does not mean that this notion of “not-all” in itself does not encompass totality and therefore negates it. On the contrary, this “not” adds something essential to the “all”. Thus Zupančič says:

In truth, we are dealing with two different types of totality or “whole”, the difference conceptualized by Lacan as that between the “all” and the “not-all”. Crucial in understanding this difference is precisely to avoid the idea that “not-all” is the opposite of all, and thus of totality. Rather, the “not-all” is the “all” to which something more gets added, it is the “all” plus the point of view from which this all appears as “all”. This point is now situated within the “whole”/“all”, which for this very reason becomes not-whole/not-all; that is to say, it includes its own negativity.⁴⁵

The encounter with the negative, manifested in Verney's confrontation with the closed latch of the deserted house, bestows on the last man the mandate of a witness – a witness who lingers in the new world as a remnant of the one that has been brought to an end. When the endling remains in the world, as the last remnant of humankind, there is no reconfiguration of that irretrievably vanished totality. Verney persists as that very “not” of “all”, as the one who remains in the destruction of the whole as its last part, alone through whom the glimpse of the whole is possible, which now emerges as another (different) totality. The endling stands in the place “from which this all appears as ‘all’.”⁴⁶ – at the place of beholding the new world, as something that has remained “after us” – after the destroyed whole that has left its last witness to stand at the end. The last

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about making it.” (Alenka Zupančič, *The Apocalypse is (Still) Disappointing*, *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique*, 10–11 (2017–2018), p. 22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

man who, as the bearer of its memory, at last finds his home in the emptiness of the end.⁴⁷

It is memory that chases Verney, that “haunts” him.⁴⁸ Here a specifically Nietzschean moment creeps in, revolving around the concept of forgetting, with which Verney has great difficulty –as much as he wishes to forget, he cannot, and it is precisely from this that his envy of the animals, whom he envies for their ability to be unhistorical, arises. Thus, on one occasion, as he watches a herd of cattle pass by, he wonders, “Why could I not forget myself like one of those animals, and no longer suffer the wild tumult of misery that I endure?”⁴⁹ and another time, as he searches for the difference between them and himself:

I am not much unlike to you. Nerves, pulse, brain, joint, and flesh, of such am I composed, and ye are organized by the same laws. I have something beyond this, but I will call it a defect, not an endowment, if it leads me to misery, while ye are happy.⁵⁰

Here Mary Shelley, through Verney, seems to be invoking the voice of Friedrich Nietzsche, who writes in the famous passage from *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* in Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*:

Consider the herd grazing before you. These animals do not know what yesterday and today are but leap about, eat, rest, digest and leap again; and so from morning to night and from day to day, only briefly concerned with their pleasure and displeasure, enthralled by the moment and for that reason neither melancholy nor bored. It is hard for a man to see this, for he is proud of being human and not an

⁴⁷ In her spin on Blanchot’s thought, Zupančič demonstrates that the end is not something that lies somewhere further ahead in time, but that the end has already come. (See *ibid.*, p. 24.) Tadej Troha makes a similar argument in his analysis of the structure of the crisis, in which he highlights the notion of the “beginning” as something that the “end” entails: “The beginning, insofar as it was left to play, was not a beginning understood as the usual opposite of the end – its function was rather to dynamize, to bring into being the space of the end itself and to extend it into eternity.” (Troha, *Intervencije v nepovratno*, p. 225.)

⁴⁸ To paraphrase Nietzsche’s thought about the past returning like a “specter” in Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. P. Preuss, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1986, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 459.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

animal and yet regards its happiness with envy because he wants nothing other than to live like the animal, neither bored nor in pain, yet wants it in vain because he does not want it like the animal. Man may well ask the animal: why do you not speak to me of your happiness but only look at me? The animal does want to answer and say: because I always immediately forget what I wanted to say—but then it already forgot this answer and remained silent: so that man could only wonder.⁵¹

Verney sees his ability to remember or rather his inability to forget not as an advantage he would have as a human being in contrast to an animal, but as something fundamentally defective that, on the contrary, deprives him of something that an animal has. According to Nietzsche, the past is the burden of human existence – a heavy chain that man, unable to free himself from it, drags behind him while it drags him down: “however far and fast he runs, the chain runs with him.”⁵² Or, to use another Nietzschean metaphor, memory is like a page continuously being torn out of the “scroll of time,” always “fluttering” back into one’s lap,⁵³ and as impossible to get rid of as it is easy for an animal to do so, which is capable of forgetting every moment almost instantaneously – while man, if we apply here Virno or Bergson, rather hypertrophizes than erases – constantly making a copy of the present and duplicating it in his memory as the surplus of this work.⁵⁴

In this way, memory becomes a distractor from that true animal happiness of which the animal cannot speak because instantaneous erasure is inscribed in it as its condition, which so often eludes man and of which the animal would sooner be silent than speak. Verney, on the other hand, sees himself as an unhappy being, unable to forget his own finitude, a remnant of a past world that now dwells in him only as a memory. If the animal lives unhistorically, “for it goes into the present like a number without leaving a curious fraction,”⁵⁵ Verney shows himself precisely as the remnant of an equation that has not been solved completely.

⁵¹ Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, p. 8.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Paolo Virno, *Déjà Vu and the End of History*, London and New York, Verso, 2015, p. 11, and Henri Bergson, “Memory of the Present and False Recognition”, trans. M. McMahon, in *Key Writings*, K. Ansell-Pearson and J. Ó Maoilearca (eds.), London, Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 143.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, p. 9.

What Verney longs for, when he is not longing for a companion – for he is aware that there are only two possibilities of a happy outcome – is a return to that state of *natural man* of whom Rousseau writes that it is precisely when he drinks, eats, and sleeps under a tree that he sees him as an animal⁵⁶ and in that state as content.⁵⁷ Rousseau's Savage lives in the immediacy of the moment,⁵⁸ that is, according to Nietzsche, unhistorically, without regard to any time other than the present. In this natural state, he also has no need for another man, for it is, among other things, the break with the solitary way of life that is, according to Rousseau, the source of all man's ailments and sorrow.⁵⁹ The natural man, instead of chains, always carries "all of [him]self along with him"⁶⁰ and thus wanders in the woods without any need of his fellow man.⁶¹ On the other hand, the historical man, such as Verney, who remains as a living memory of another world and as such is unable to forget himself and live like an animal – unable to return to a life that resides only in the present, untouched by the past – can only find happiness in a non-natural state⁶² in which he dwells with his fellow man – but even that is no more – and so the miserable predicament of the ending comes full circle.

As Nietzsche says, "the past must be forgotten if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present,"⁶³ and Verney shows himself to be the ultimate example of the man Nietzsche offers us when he says that we should imagine as "an extreme example a man who possesses no trace of the power to forget, who is condemned everywhere to see becoming: such a one no longer believes in his own existence, no longer believes in himself; he sees everything flow apart in mobile points and loses himself in the stream of becoming: he will, like the true pupil of

⁵⁶ Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses and Essay on the Origin of Languages*, p. 141.

⁵⁷ "I ask, which of the two, Civil life or natural life, is more liable to become intolerable to those who enjoy it? We see around us almost only People who complain of their existence, even some who deprive themselves of it as far as they are able, and the combination of divine and human Laws hardly suffices to put a halt to this disorder: I ask whether anyone has ever heard tell that is so much as occurred to a Savage who is free to complain of life and to kill himself? One ought, then, to judge with less pride on which side genuine misery lies." (*Ibid.* p. 158.)

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 144–145.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁶² For Rousseau that would be the *Civil state*.

⁶³ Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, p. 9.

Heraclitus, hardly dare to lift a finger.”⁶⁴ When Verney realises that he has been left in the world as the last of his kind and that, as a consequence, everything around him has been subjected to oblivion, he begins in a certain sense to dwell within the end.⁶⁵ An end which, like ink, blends with the specific atmosphere of the feeling of grief,⁶⁶ as Shelley describes it, a sensation marked by time and that precisely for this reason encompasses “all”, stains it and inhabits it, and is thus spatialized:⁶⁷

Oh! Grief is fantastic; it weaves a web on which to trace the history of its woe from every form and change around; it incorporates itself with all living nature; it finds sustenance in every object; as light, it fills all things, and like light, it gives its own colours to all.⁶⁸

Although the last man is surrounded by oblivion, at the same time it is everything that is subject to it that triggers his memory most intensely. The end thus covers all that Verney sees and permeates everything wherever he goes, and his loss begins to function as a certain colouring of the world to which everything but he is blind. In his final decision to set sail,⁶⁹ Verney reminds us of another famous seafarer – Homer’s Odysseus, who on one of his most famous journeys sailed past the Sirens, tied to the mast, listening to their song, which lured him, like all their victims, to jump into the water and join them – and in doing so, to perish. As interpreted by Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the siren song is essentially a call of allurements, luring the lis-

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

⁶⁵ Zupančič considers our contemporaneity as a time of living within the apocalypse, see Zupančič, “The Apocalypse is (Still) Disappointing”.

⁶⁶ Similar on the relation between grief and the apocalypse can be found in *ibid.*

⁶⁷ The dynamics of the spatialization of the end, evident in Verney’s confrontation with the closed latch of the empty cottage he cannot enter and his taking refuge outside in the open, can be condensed into what Troha call the “topology of the end”, in *ibid.*, p. 46. “In the universe of time that has turned into spade [...] the dynamics can only be generated within what is usually considered as the materialization of stasis and monotony.” (Tadej Troha, “No Louder: Beckett and the Dynamics of Monotony”, in E. Ruda (ed.), *Beckett and Dialectics*, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, p. 191.)

⁶⁸ Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 446.

⁶⁹ “I would coast the beautiful shores and sunny promontories of the blue Mediterranean, pass Naples, along Calabria, and would dare the twin perils of Scylla and Charybdis.” (*Ibid.*, p. 469.) This note makes it clear that on this journey he will inevitably pass by the Sirens, which, according to Homer, are located before Scylla and Charybdis.

tener to lose himself in the past – a temptation that tempts the yearning with the promise of the return of what has been irretrievably lost.

Come hither, as thou farest, renowned Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans; stay thy ship that thou mayest listen to the voice of us two. For never yet has any man rowed past this isle in his black ship until he has heard the sweet voice from our lips. Nay, he has joy of it, and goes his way a wiser man. For we know all the toils that in wide Troy the Argives and Trojans endured through the will of the gods, and we know all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth.⁷⁰

The siren song is deceptive, for it lures under the pretext of knowledge, but the knowledge offered by the sirens is the temptation to return the irretrievable – that which has already taken place and is written into the irreversible. Whoever wishes to persevere must plug their ears with beeswax or, like Odysseus, tie themselves tightly to the mast, otherwise they will pay for the past with the future: “If the Sirens know everything that has happened, they demand the future as its price, and their promise of a happy homecoming is the deception by which the past entraps a humanity filled with longing.”⁷¹ Verney, the last man, the only remnant of the past world he longs for and without a future of his own, cannot resist its lure – the song may not be false after all and fulfils what it promises; in exchange for the sacrifice, the promised return is enacted in the transmission of a memory that returns as a prophecy from the lips of the Sibyl – finally, the last man answers the call that rises from the sea and sails into the embrace of the Sirens.

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⁷⁰ Homer, *Odyssey: Books 1-12*, trans. A.T. Murray, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995, Book XII, pp. 445–447.

⁷¹ Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. E. Jephcott, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 26.

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