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Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?

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Ihab Hassan

*Prometheus as Performer:
Toward a Posthumanist Culture?*

A University Masque in Five Scenes*

for *Anima*

He goes from death to death, who sees the
many here.

—*The Vedanta*

The eternal body of man is the Imagination,
that is, God himself.

—Blake

The mystery of the world is its comprehensibility.

—Einstein

Our mission, unfinished, may take a thousand
years.

—Mao

From women's eyes this doctrine I derive:
They sparkle with the right Promethean fire. . . .

—Shakespeare

*This essay was originally delivered as the keynote address for the International Symposium on Postmodern Performance, held at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, 17-20 November 1976. It will appear in *Performance: Presence and Play in Postmodern Culture*, edited by Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello, Coda Press (Madison, Wisconsin). We thank Professor Benamou and the Center for allowing it to appear in *The Georgia Review*.

The Characters in Order of Appearance:

- PRETEXT: who opens and presumably explains the nonaction.
 MYTHOTEXT: who is obsessed with the story of Prometheus.
 TEXT: who carries the burden of the intellectual narrative.
 HETEROTEXT: who speaks only to quote from various authorities.
 CONTEXT: who pretends to be a historian.
 METATEXT: who enjoys commenting on Text and criticizing colleagues.
 POSTEXT: who vainly attempts to conclude the nonaction.
 PARATEXT (inaudible in print): who breaks the frame now and then with his comments, and who has already appeared as a version of the speaker.

 PRETEXT

[appearing from nowhere, speaking rather superciliously]

Good ladies and gentle men: This masque attempts to place the subject of postmodern performance in a wide and speculative context. About performance as such, little will be said; about postmodernism, even less. (Certain academics on this campus have already turned postmodernism into a tedious travesty.) This masque would rather reflect upon the lineaments of an emergent culture. Call it posthumanist culture—or call it nothing at all. It remains the matrix of all our performances. And it remains (blessings on great Tom Eliot) undefined.

One or two words more. If posthumanist culture is the matrix of contemporary performance, there is a matrix larger still: the universe itself, everything that was, is, and will become. What a performance! But who can speak for the universe? No one—no, not even the Titan Prometheus. Still, linking Cosmos and Culture, Divine Space and Human Time, Sky and Earth, the Universal and the Concrete, Prometheus may prove himself to be a figure of flawed and evolving consciousness, an emblem of human destiny.

No more pretexts; the masque follows in five scenes.

Scene the First

From Myth to Politics: the Question of the One and the Many

MYTHOTEXT

[in a voice resonant with the archetypes]

Prometheus, son of Iapetus, Titan turncoat and trickster. There are many versions of his story, but the main outlines are familiar. He sided with the new Olympian gods (Zeus & Co.) against his own chthonic kind. Yet Prometheus, that forethinker, could never leave well enough alone.

Some say he created men out of clay and water; some say he only gave them fire. The fire was stolen from the smith-god Hephaestus—or was it taken from Apollo's sun? It was stolen, in any event, and hidden in a fennel stalk. But this fire was no simple element: it was knowledge and imagination, the alphabet, medicine, and all the arts. Stolen fire, red forbidden fruit. We owe everything to a crime. "Prometheus's double nature is always acknowledged; as by Coleridge who said that he was the Redeemer and the Devil jumbled into one" (Denis Donoghue, Thieves of Fire).

Ah, but the doubleness of this trickster is not merely theological; it is political and epistemological as well. And it is a doubleness that wants to become one again. Socrates here is our authority: "There is a gift of the gods . . . which they let fall from their abode, and it was through Prometheus, or one like him, that it reached mankind [no emphasis on theft here], together with a fire exceeding bright." This gift, Socrates goes on to say in the "Philebus," is a perception that "all things . . . consist of a one and a many, and have in their nature a conjunction of limit and unlimitedness."

Thus the One and the Many enter Western thought.

TEXT

[forcefully]

Thank you, Mythotext, you have led us from myth to politics through philosophy. Your image of Prometheus mirrors our own present, in which the one and the many, the ecumenical

will of humankind and its will to secession, hold their bloody play under the twin aspects of totalitarianism (torture) and anarchy (terrorism). Convergences and divergences, conjunctions and disjunctions, are visible everywhere; on the one hand various myths of totality, on the other, diverse ideologies of fracture. Thus, the more Marshall McLuhan proclaims "the global village," or Buckminster Fuller "spaceship earth," or Norman O. Brown "the mystic body of mankind," the more Jacques Derrida and his *confrères* insist upon *différance* and the metaphysics of fragments.

The news, alas, seems to favor Derrida. Our planet continually splinters, breaks according to ideology, religion, class, race, language, sex, and age. The earth splits into blocks, blocks into nations, nations into provinces, provinces into tribes, tribes into families, families into feuding individuals—and individuals, soon enough, alas, into random atoms. Can it be fortuitous that atoms themselves have been split into the tiniest, the shiest particles, particles that seem a mathematical whisper, a mere breath? Whose breath? The breath of the universe?

No doubt, convergence and divergence are but two aspects of the same reality, the same process. Totalitarianism and anarchy summon each the other. And the more communication threatens to become global, the more individuals, insisting on their quiddity, will discover the deep and obscure need for misunderstanding. But is this all we can expect from our earth and sky, our brief moment of sodality?

There are poets and philosophers, scientists and mystics, who lead us to expect more. They believe in some richer relation between the one and the many, the universal and the concrete. Like Blake, in his prophecy called "America," they envision a movement "beyond struggling afflictions," toward "another portion of the infinite." Like Whitman, they sing of an "orbic vision," in which the inner divisions of consciousness and the external divisions of humankind are healed and made whole—made whole but *not* homogeneous, healed but *not* rendered uniform:

Have you thought there could be but a single supreme?
 There can be any number of supremes . . .
 All is eligible to all.

Is this the project of the Promethean consciousness? The project is more problematic than we can imagine or foretell.

HETEROTEXT

[*chiming in*]

Text and Mythotext, listen to some other voices of the "orbic vision," speaking variously of the concrete and the universal:

Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Mind*:

This simple force [concrete spirit in government] allows, indeed, the community to unfold and expand into its component members, and to give each part subsistence and self-existence of its own. Spirit finds in this way its realization or its objective existence. . . . But spirit is at the same time the force of the whole, combining these parts again within the unity which negates them . . . and keeping them aware that their life only lies in the whole.

*

Marx in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*:

Man, much as he may therefore be a *particular* individual . . . is just as much the *totality*—the ideal totality—the subjective existence of thought and experienced society present for itself. . . .

*

Teilhard de Chardin in *The Future of Man*:

If there is any characteristic clearly observable in the progress of Nature towards higher consciousness, it is that this is achieved by increasing differentiation, which in itself causes ever stronger individualities to emerge. . . . In other words, in a converging Universe, each element achieves completeness, not directly in a separate consummation, but by incorporation in a higher pole of consciousness in which alone it can enter into contact with all the others.

*

Jacques Monod in *Chance and Necessity*:

The weight of an allosteric enzyme molecule capable of the same performances is of the order of a 10^{-17} of a gram. Which is a million billion times less than an electronic relay. That astronomical figure affords some idea of the "cybernetic" (i.e., teleonomic) power at the disposal of a cell equipped with hundreds or thousands of these microscopic entities, all far more clever than the Maxwell-Szilard-Brillouin demon.

Hegel and Marx, Teilhard and Monod, a motley crew. But do they not all sing, each in his key, the same song of singleness in variousness?

TEXT

[*severely*]

Heterotext, do be sensible. Your voices are a little too obscure and worse: mystical. There is nothing supernatural in the process leading us to a posthumanist culture. That process depends mainly on the growing intrusion of the human mind into nature and history, on the dematerialization of life and the conceptualization of existence. In that sense, we need not wait for the end of History, as Hegel thought, to witness the synthesis of the Concrete and the Universal, Slave and Master, Individual and State. Each of us, by virtue of Dream, Hope, and Language, provides some awkward version of the Concrete Universal. For what is the human animal, as Monod himself says, but the most distinctive organism on earth, and at the same time the most self-transcendent—I mean the most capable of abstracting itself through language, and rising equivocally through layers of consciousness?

As for you, Mythotext, I must tell you this. Prometheus may be a vague metaphor of a mind struggling with the One and the Many. Yet, I prefer to view his struggle in narrower perspective. His mind is where Imagination and Science, Myth and Technology, Language and Number sometimes meet. Or put it both prophetically and archetypically: Prometheus pre-sages the marriage of Earth and Sky. Only then, perhaps, will posthumanism see the dubious light of a new day.

[*No one answers Text; the scene closes.*]

Scene the Second

From Lascaux to Henry Adams: A Historical Collage

CONTEXT

[*entering ponderously, gravid with history*]

Allow me to have my turn, young texts: this matter you so ardently discuss requires a less hurried perspective. Post-humanism seems to you a sudden mutation of the times; in fact, the conjunctions of imagination and science, myth and tech-

nology, have begun by firelight in the caves of Lascaux. But unlike Mythotext here, I am less concerned with myth than with history. From the Pythagoreans, through medieval alchemists, to the European Renaissance, a rich hermetic tradition has opened itself to both science and mystery.

MYTHOTEXT

[interrupting]

So much hermetic knowledge throughout history—and so little wisdom! Why then did the Promethean fire fail humankind? Is it merely because it was stolen, a power unearned, exceeding the reach of human piety? Or is it rather because the gift itself lacked an essential element: civic wisdom. In Plato's dialogue, Protagoras tells how Epimetheus, having squandered all the divine gifts on animals, found nothing more to give humankind. While Epimetheus sat puzzling about this, "Prometheus came to inspect the work, and found the other animals well off for everything, but man naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed. . . . Prometheus, therefore, being at a loss to provide any means of salvation for man, stole from Hephaestus and Athene the gift of skill in the arts together with fire. . . . In this way, man acquired sufficient resources to keep himself alive, but had no political wisdom. This was in the keeping of Zeus, and Prometheus no longer had the right of entry to the citadel where Zeus dwelt . . . [emphasis mine]."

CONTEXT

[ponders the interruption, then decides to ignore it]

The European hermetic tradition included Albertus Magnus, Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno—authors whom that "New Prometheus," Dr. Victor Frankenstein, studied profoundly before turning to shallower things. Surprisingly, this same hermetic tradition affected some eminent scientists, not in fiction but in history. Kepler, we know, wrote the horoscope of Wallenstein in 1609; and stated in *De Stella Nova* (quoted in Koestler's *Roots of Coincidence*):

Nothing exists nor happens in the visible sky that is not sensed in some hidden manner by the faculties of

Earth and Nature. . . . The natural soul of man is not larger in size than a single point, and on this point the form and character of the entire sky is potentially engraved, as if it were a hundred times larger.

Even the great Newton spent much of his earlier life in alchemical and Faust-like pursuits. "His deepest instincts," wrote Lord Keynes, "were occult, esoteric, semantic." Of this darker Newton, George B. Leonard has also said in *The Transformation*:

More than a million words of . . . [his] occult writing has survived. Much of the summaries have to do with an elixir or Philosopher's Stone that not only will aid in the transmutation of metals but will also invest the owner with magical powers—seeing at a great distance, forcing others to bow to one's will, gaining eternal youth.

But the outstanding example of the conjunctions between science and imagination, technology and art, remains Leonardo da Vinci, who has haunted so many minds since the Renaissance. Both Freud and Valéry saw in Leonardo more than a total and meditative curiosity; they also saw in him something approaching a unified consciousness, perhaps even the radical process of consciousness itself, made incarnate. This has led Roger Shattuck to say:

At the very moment when . . . Western consciousness was hardening into a division between reason and feeling, two of the greatest contemporary minds were saying precisely the opposite in terms that recapitulate the history of modern European thought. They assert, in effect, that the experience of four hundred years tells us urgently and insistently not to divide up the mind.

At that same turning point of the twentieth century, Henry Adams recorded his own intuition of the undivided mind. Dating his words exactly in the year 1900, Adams wrote in a famous passage of his *Education*:

Copernicus and Galileo had broken many professional necks about 1600; Columbus had stood the world on its head toward 1500; but the nearest approach to the revolution of 1900 was that of 310, when Constantine set up the Cross. The rays that Langley disowned, as

well as those which he fathered, were occult, supersensual, irrational; they were a revelation of a mysterious energy like that of the Cross. . . .

METATEXT

[*clipped, logical, almost prissy*]

Myth, philosophy, and history are all very nice. But this collage—shall we say of significant moments?—must leave the audience non-plussed. Permit me, therefore, to summarize the inactions of this masque. Insofar as I can understand my learned and loquacious colleagues, they wish to maintain that:

1. the cosmos is performance, posthumanist culture is a performance in progress, and their symbolic nexus is Prometheus;

2. Prometheus is himself the figure of a flawed consciousness struggling to transcend such divisions as the One and the Many, Cosmos and Culture, the Universal and the Concrete;

3. with regard to posthumanism itself, the most relevant aspect of the Promethean dialectic concerns Imagination and Science, Myth and Technology, Earth and Sky, two realms tending to one;

4. this dialectic, however, has a hoary history; the languages of imagination and the languages of science have often mingled and crossed in certain epochs and in certain great minds of the past;

5. because both imagination and science are agents of change, crucibles of values, modes not only of representation but also of transformation, their interplay may now be the vital performing principle in culture and consciousness—a key to posthumanism.

[*Text, Mythotext, Context coldly nod their approval;
the scene ends.*]

Scene the Third

Contemporary Culture

TEXT

[delighted to hold forth again]

Humanists are a little Epimethean, I fear; the astonishing convergences of imagination and science, myth and technology, in contemporary culture have tended to elude them. Nor have the great modern minds which currently command the greatest authority—I mean Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, Sartre and Lévi-Strauss, Heidegger and Husserl—illuminated particularly this question. (William James may prove a curious exception.) Yet, more and more, the evidence suggests that the “two cultures” of C. P. Snow and F. R. Leavis, of abstract, sky-haunted technophiles dominated by the male principle, and moist, earth-bound arcadians ruled by the female principle, are slowly becoming obsolete as consciousness evolves, through many set-backs and contradictions, to include them both.

Evidence of these problematic convergences centers on four regions of contemporary culture:

- a. the creative process in science and art.
- b. the new twilight zone of experimental science.
- c. the incorporation of technology into the arts, both as theme and form.
- d. the existential search for a unified sensibility.

A recent article, entitled “Beyond Arcadians and Technophiles” (which appeared in the Spring 1976 number of *The Massachusetts Review*) deals superficially with these issues. Perhaps I can call on Heterotext, whose penchants are bibliographic, to summarize *briefly* its argument.

HETEROTEXT

[with alacrity]

I will first quote, then query, then cite a few bibliographic references.

A. On the Creative Process:

§Quotations:

Max Planck: “The pioneer scientist must have a vivid intuitive imagination for new ideas, ideas not generated

by deduction, but by artistically creative imagination."

Jacques Monod: "I am sure every scientist must have noticed how his mental reflection, at the deeper level, is not verbal: to be absorbed in thought is to be embarked upon an *imagined experience*, an experience simulated with the aid of forms, or forces, of interactions which together only barely compose an 'image' in the visual sense of the term."

§*Queries:*

What, then, are the roles of dream, play, imagination, and aesthetic sensibility in scientific, mathematical, and artistic creation? Which traits do creative personalities share, regardless of their fields? What indeed do we mean by creativity? Do certain mental structures constitute the languages and methods of various disciplines? Can neurological research on the one hand and phenomenological theory on the other move toward a unified concept of brain and mind?

§*References:*

Frank Barron, *Creativity and Personal Freedom*
 Brewster Ghiselin, ed., *The Creative Process*
 Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*
 Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*
 Wilder Penfield, *The Mystery of Mind*
 Jean Piaget, *Biology and Knowledge*
 Hans Seyle, *From Dream to Discovery*
 A. M. Taylor, *Imagination and the Growth of Science*
 Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*

B. The Twilight Zone of Science:

§*Quotations:*

Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker: "the [yoga] concept of *Prana* is not necessarily incompatible with our physics. *Prana* is spatially extended and vitalizing. Hence above all it is moving potency. The quantum theory designates something not entirely remote from this by the term 'probability amplitude.'"

Gunther Stent: "Since John Cage had pointed out to me the analogy between the genetic code and the *I-Ching*, I have looked into this matter a little more. To my amazement I found that the 'natural' order of the *I-Ching* hexagrams generates a table of nucleotide triplet codons which shows the same inter-codon generic relations as Cricks' table!"

Lyall Watson: "All the best science has soft edges, limits that are still obscure and extend without interruption into areas that are wholly inexplicable."

§Queries:

What changes in the logos (the rationality) of the sciences may be expected as their frontiers expand? What are the epistemological as well as social implications of current scientific experiments with transcendental meditation, bio-feedback, parapsychology, alien and artificial intelligence, or cosmic consciousness?

§References:

Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *Robots, Men and Minds*
 Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*
 Gerald Feinberg, *The Prometheus Project*
 C. G. Jung & Wolfgang Pauli, *Natureerklärung und Psyche*
 Arthur Koestler & J. R. Smythies, eds., *Beyond Reductionism*
 Lawrence LeShan, *The Medium, the Mystic, and the Physicist*
 Raymond Ruyer, *La gnose de Princeton*
 R. G. H. Siu, *The Tao of Science*
 C. H. Waddington, *Beyond Appearance*
 Lyall Watson, *Supernature*
 Norbert Wiener, *God and Golem, Inc.*

C. The Interpenetration of Technology and Art (with acknowledgment to Kathy Woodward):

§Quotations:

Marcel Duchamp to Stieglitz: "You know exactly how I feel about photography. I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable."

Andy Warhol: "Machines have less problems. I'd like to be a machine."

Douglas Davis: "Art, technology, and even science seem to me three veils for the same face, three metaphors that cover, then dissolve, into a single reality."

§Queries:

To what extent are various technologies integrating themselves into our art forms? Has technology begun to affect not only particular genres—cybernetic or op art, electronic music, video art, contemporary dance—but also the very definition of art? Indeed, is it possible that technology may be transforming human consciousness itself, so as to make art as we have known it gradually obsolete? In short, where will Marinetti's Futurism finally lead us?

§References:

Jonathan Benthall, *Science and Technology in Art Today*
 Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture*
 John Cage, *Silence and A Year From Monday*
 Douglas Davis, *Art and the Future*

- Marcel Duchamp, *Complete Works*
 Harrold Harris, ed., *Astride the Two Cultures: Arthur Koestler at 70*
 Gyorgy Kepes, ed., *Structure in Art and Science*
 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*
 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*
 Jasia Reichardt, *The Computer in Art*
 Wylie Sypher, *Technology and Literature*
 Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*
 Robert Wilson, *Einstein on the Beach*

D. The Existential Search for a Unified Sensibility

§Quotations:

Charles Lindbergh: "Decades spent in contact with science and its vehicles have directed my mind and senses to areas beyond their reach. I now see scientific accomplishment as a path, not an end; a path leading to and disappearing in mystery."

Robert Pirsig: "The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower."

Jimi Hendrix: "It's music. . . . It's electricity . . . that will take us all to that spiritual high I call the electric church. . . ."

Margaret Mead: "We need a religious system with science at its very core, in which the traditional opposition between science and religion, reflected in grisly truth by our technologically desecrated countryside, can again be resolved, but in terms of the future instead of the past."

§Queries:

To what extent do the diverse careers of an astronaut like Michael Collins, a writer like Thomas Pynchon or Norman Mailer, a musician like John Cage or Jimi Hendrix, a historian like William Irwin Thompson, an anthropologist like Margaret Mead, and a Zen cyclist like Robert Pirsig reflect an authentic quest in our post-industrial society for an infinitely optative yet unified sensibility? And again, what are the personal, political, and philosophical implications of such a quest?

§References:

- Michael Collins, *Carrying the Fire*
 Norman Mailer, *Of a Fire on the Moon*
 Margaret Mead, *Twentieth Century Faith*
 Joseph Chilton Pearce, *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg*

Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*
 William Irwin Thompson, *Passages About Earth*

[*Having over-extended its mind with queries, Heterotext suddenly stops; thus ends the scene.*]

Scene the Fourth

The Future of Vitruvian Man

TEXT

[*now determined to quote almost as much as Heterotext*]

At present, posthumanism may appear variously as a dubious neologism, the latest slogan, or simply another image of man's recurrent self-hate. Yet posthumanism may also hint at a potential in our culture, hint at a tendency struggling to become more than a trend. The Promethean myth, after all, contains an enigmatic prophecy. How, then, shall we understand post-humanism?

We need first to understand that the human form—including human desire and all its external representations—may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism. The figure of Vitruvian Man, arms and legs defining the measure of things, so marvelously drawn by Leonardo, has broken through its enclosing circle and square, and spread across the cosmos. "Stands he not thereby in the center of Immensities, in the conflux of Eternities?" Carlyle ominously asked. Less than a century after, Pioneer 10 carries the human form and the human sign beyond the solar system into the intergalactic spaces; and Carl Sagan wryly speculates, in *The Cosmic Connection*, about the future of human intelligence, babbling its childhood to the universe.

This expansion of human consciousness into the cosmos, this implication of mind into farthest matter, becomes awesome when astrophysicists reflect upon the "origin" of the universe.

As Sir Bernard Lovell, Professor of Radio Astronomy at the University of Manchester, put it:

The transference from the infinities of density and size at time zero [when the universe began] to the finite quantities encompassed by the laws of the physical world may lie beyond scientific comprehension. Does man face this difficulty because he has externalized the object of his investigation? Is there reality in these externalized procedures? What is man's connection with the universe of atoms, stars, and galaxies? . . . Indeed, I am inclined to accept contemporary scientific evidence as indicative of a far greater degree of man's total involvement with the universe. . . . A remarkable and intimate relationship between man, the fundamental constants of nature, and the initial moments of space and time seems to be an inescapable condition of existence. (*New York Times Magazine*, 16 November 1975)

This cosmological view, I think, requires from us a genuine alteration in our modes of feeling and thought and performance, an alteration that must go beyond, say, Albert Schweitzer's "reverence before life," and beyond the *participation mystique* attributed to primitive man.

But this cosmological extension of human consciousness (which both Teilhard de Chardin and Marshall McLuhan have long, if differently, perceived) is not the only force tending toward posthumanism. Indeed, the re-vision of man is currently promoted by certain prescient humanists as well as by most scientists. Thus, for instance, Claude Lévi-Strauss, both humanist and scientist, speaks darkly at the end of *A World on the Wane*:

The world began without the human race and it will end without it. The institutions, manners, and customs which I shall have spent my life in cataloguing and trying to understand are an ephemeral efflorescence of a creative process in relation to which they are meaningless.

And thus, again, Michael Foucault in *The Order of Things*:

One thing in any case is certain: man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. . . . As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.

Yet both Foucault and Lévi-Strauss, I am convinced, mean not the literal end of man but the end of a particular image of us, shaped as much by Descartes, say, as by Thomas More or Erasmus or Montaigne. That is why contemporary structuralist thought emphasizes so much the dissolution of the "subject," the annihilation of that hard Cartesian ego or consciousness which distinguished itself from the world by turning the world into an object. The Self, structuralists and post-structuralists insist, following the intuition of Nietzsche, is really an empty "place" where many selves come to mingle and depart.

A similar perception, deriving from biology more than psychology or philosophy, persuades Elizabeth Mann Borghese that human nature is still evolving:

One might even say that whether postmodern man is still *Homo sapiens* remains to be seen. A species that can fly is different from one that cannot. A species that can transport itself out of earth's biosphere to other planets is different from an earthbound species. A species that can transplant vital organs from one member to another, blurring the boundaries between this individual and that individual and between life and death, is different from a species whose members cannot do this. (*Center Magazine*, March/April 1973)

Projected out of this world and into the universe, the physical and mental possibilities of evolution become even more staggering. "Only a minute fraction, an inconceivably small fraction of all possible forms of life have existed on earth," writes James F. Danielli, Director of the Center for Theoretical Biology at SUNY—Buffalo. "It is inconceivable that the terrestrial organisms we now have are representative samples of the organisms which can exist" (*Center Magazine*, October 1972). Concretely, this means that the re-vision of human destiny must ultimately consider that destiny in a vast evolutionary scheme.

More soberly, more immediately perhaps, a posthuman philosophy must address the complex issue of artificial intelligence, which most of us know only by the familiar name of HAL (the supercomputer in Kubrick's *2001*, so strangely human, that is, at once so sinister and pathetic in every circuit and bit). But artificial intelligence is not merely a figment of science

fiction; it almost lives in our midst. There is an anecdote about Alan Turing, the young mathematical genius who died in 1954, on whose work John von Neumann built modern computer theory—a somber anecdote that we do well to ponder. It is told by the wife of one of Turing's closest colleagues:

I remember sitting in our garden at Bowdon about 1949 while Alan and my husband discussed the machine and its future activities. I couldn't take part in the discussion . . . but suddenly my ear picked up a remark which sent a shiver down my back. Alan said reflectively, "I suppose, when it gets to that stage, we shan't know how it does it." (*New York Times Magazine*, 15 February 1976)

So much for the chilling obsolescence of the human brain.

Yet the human brain itself does not really know whether it will become obsolete—or simply need to revise its self-conception. The argument explored by Arthur Koestler, in *The Ghost in the Machine*, that the human brain may be radically flawed—may be, that is, an organ inadequate to its task, a "mistake" among countless other "mistakes" of evolution—remains a hypothesis, perhaps itself more mistaken than the brain which conceived it. Will artificial intelligences supersede the human brain, rectify it, or simply extend its powers? We do not know. But this we do know: artificial intelligences, from the humblest calculator to the most transcendent computer, help to transform the image of man, the concept of the human. They are agents of a new posthumanism, even if they do no more than the IBM 360-196 which "performs in a few hours all the arithmetic estimated ever to have been done by hand by all mankind" (Henry J. Taylor, in *Dimensions of the Future*).

All these visions finally boggle the minds of poor humanists like ourselves. Yet they are not the visions of science fictionists and future shockers, intended to amuse and terrify us—even as they make the best-seller lists. These visions are immediate and concrete. Technology and the pharmaceutical industry have already altered most performances in the Olympic Games; and those Bionic Women from the German Democratic Republic may point to a future more golden than all their medals. And when the figure of Leonardo's Vitruvian Man appears on the

cover of our *TV Guide* nowadays, under it runs the caption: "Compared with the real bionic people we expect in the not-too-distant future . . . The Six Million Dollar Man is Just a Tin Lizzie" (28 August 1976).

What then will the future, in its middle distances, bring to us?

[*Long pause as Text tries to penetrate Time; the scene slowly fades and ends.*]

Scene the Fifth

The Warnings of the Earth

MYTHOTEXT

[*enters in outrage*]

This optimism is more kitsch than vision. You forget: Prometheus was a trickster and thief. In the end, Text here seems to side more with Goethe, Percy Shelley, and Gide, in their romantic interpretation of the myth, than with wise Aeschylus, Mary Shelley, or Kafka. But to open oneself with hope to the Promethean endeavor is also to recognize its error and terror, its madness within.

Consider for a moment. We know that Iapetus was father to Prometheus. But, pray, who was his mother? Was it Asia, or Themis, or perhaps Clymene, "shapely daughter of Ocean"? Accounts differ. Yet their differences do not obscure a certain point: the shameless misogyny of the myth. Epimetheus, we know, takes Pandora to wife. Fashioned exquisitely by Hephaestus, she is sent as the cunning revenge of Zeus. Hesiod put it brutally: "Gods and men were speechless when they saw how deadly and how irresistible was the trick with which Zeus was going to catch mankind. This was the origin of the damnable race of women. . . . They have no place where the curse of poverty is; they belong with luxury" (Theogony). But the curse is not simply economic; Epimetheus, against the advice of his brother, opens Pandora's box, and all the ills of mankind ensue.

From the start, great writers have sensed that Prometheus must do more than overthrow patriarchic Zeus; he must also recover the female principle within his own consciousness. Thus Aeschylus included in his work both Themis and the watery nymph Io; and Percy Shelley gave Asia a creative role. Indeed, Shelley tried to place love at the heart of his work. And Dick Higgins went farther: he made Prometheus a sexy woman.

The Earth must be heard. Yes, Earth must be heard, else Consciousness turn the Sky into fire.

TEXT

[*placatingly*]

Calm yourself, Mythotext, I concur, I freely concede the point. Obviously, the marriage of Earth and Sky may never find a happy consummation. It may also beget monsters and mutants. We know all too well the litany of our failures: pollution, population, power that serves only to suppress—in short, man's deadly exploitation of nature and himself. Some, for instance, say that the technological capacities bungled in Watergate would make the "Miracle, Mystery, and Authority" of the Grand Inquisitor seem like childish play. Others caution of present and "future shock"; of cloning, parthenogenesis, transplants, prosthesis; of the alteration of memory, intelligence, and behavior; of the creation of chimeras, androids, and cyborgs. Others, still, simply prophesy of famine and global war. From D. H. Lawrence and Friedrich Juenger to Lewis Mumford, Rachel Carson, Jacques Ellul, and the Club of Rome, men and women of vision have warned against dehumanization, and challenged rampant technology—and Marx preceded them with his famous doctrine of alienation. I know all this.

Even Heidegger, despite his postmodern turn in philosophy (see the work of Richard Palmer), even Heidegger is full of foreboding on the subject. In an interview (taped in 1966 but published only this year in *Der Spiegel*) he warns that technology is no longer empowered by human reality ("*Die Technik in ihrem Wesen ist etwas, was der Mensch von sich aus nicht bewältigt*"), warns that it no longer corresponds to the human measure or way ("*wir haben noch keinen Weg, der dem Wesen*

der Technik entspricht”). How, then, can the human race “spare the earth, receive the sky, expect the gods, and have a capacity for death,” Heidegger might well wonder?

Yet even Heidegger sensed that “Not only is man by nature more daring than plant and beast. Man is at times more daring even ‘than Life itself is.’” Will this daring take us to “where all ground breaks off—into the abyss”? Or will the transhumanization of the human mean, as Arthur Clark suggests, our “childhood’s end”?

HETEROTEXT

[*quietly*]

I wish to quote from Arthur Clarke’s *Profiles of the Future*. Speaking of the future races, Clarke says:

They will have time enough, in those endless aeons, to attempt all things, and to gather all knowledge. They will not be like gods, because no gods imagined by our minds have ever possessed the powers they will command. But for all that, they may envy us, basking in the bright after glow of Creation; for we knew the universe when it was young.

MYTHOTEXT

[*who will not be assuaged*]

Text mentions the capacity for death; Heterotext speaks of the future. Prometheus is connected with both. In the “Gorgias,” Socrates claims that Prometheus had also given men exact foreknowledge of their death. But Hades, god of the underworld, complained to Zeus, and the gift was revoked. Could it be that for once Zeus acted with tact? Robbed of human mortality, how can Earth give continual birth? Without death, how can there be surprise or generation?

Yet the motives of Zeus were seldom pure. We know that after aeons of pain, Heracles delivered Prometheus from his bondage on Tartarus; for Prometheus knew a secret vital to the rule of Zeus. Some say Zeus was finally toppled, others maintain a reconciliation ensued, and a few still whisper that the sick centaur, Chiron, offered to resign his gift of immortality, and take the place of Prometheus under the vulture. Or perhaps Kafka, after all, puts it best:

*“Everyone grew weary of the meaningless affair.
The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the
wound closed wearily.*

*There remained the inexplicable mass of rock.
—The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it
came out of a substratum of truth it had in turn to
end in the inexplicable.”*

[Hush; last scene ends.]

POSTTEXT

I come at the end, though there are no ends; I come only after. And what I must say has already been said, and will be said many times thereafter.

Is it not finally plain? Prometheus, prophet, Titan transgressor and trickster, giver of fire, maker of culture—Prometheus is our performer. He performs Space and Time; he performs Desire. He suffers.

We are ourselves that performance; we perform and are performed every moment. We are the pain or play of the Human, which will not remain human. We are both Earth and Sky, Water and Fire. We are the changing form of Desire. Everything changes, and nothing, not even Death, can tire.

[Here ends the Masque.]