



Flying from History, Too Close to the Sun

The Anxious, Jubilant Futurism of Contemporary “Age of
Man” Environmentalism

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“Do you really want to waste all your best energies in this unending, futile veneration for the past, from which you will emerge exhausted, diminished, trampled on? [...] Standing on the world’s summit we launch once again our insolent challenge to the stars!” Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism.” (1909).

“What has drawn the Modern World into being is a strange, almost occult yearning for the future. The modern mind longs for the future as the medieval mind longed for Heaven.” Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*. (1977).

Abstract

There is a remarkable trend in contemporary environmentalism that emphasizes ‘accepting responsibility’ for the natural world in contrast to outdated preservationist thinking that shirks such responsibility. This approach is often explained and justified by reference to the anthropocene: *this fundamentally new epoch*— defined by human domination— *requires* active human intervention to avert planetary catastrophe. However, in this paper, I suggest this rhetoric encourages a flight from history. This often jubilant, sometimes anxious, yearning for unprecedented human innovation and— ultimately— *control* in our new millennia mirrors the Futurist movement that took off near the beginning of the last century. Despite the significant differences in the details of how academics have defended this 21st century environmental outlook, they all represent the true flight from history; they too quickly jettison the ideas of historical environmentalists and so misunderstand the environmental values at the heart of preservation that are more salient than ever.

Introduction

During the late summer of 95’ the environmental historian William Cronon published heresy in the pages of the *New York Times*. According to Cronon, wilderness as an idea was a human-construct, invented to depict society as a disease and untouched nature as a pristine sanctuary to be protected; this is what Henry David Thoreau meant, Cronon suggests, when he famously declared, “In Wildness is the preservation of the World” (Thoreau 1862). But is it? *No*, Cronon answered. There are no pristine, ahistorical, non-human wilderness sanctuaries today, if there ever were; all landscapes are humanized, and the ideals of wilderness preservationists simply reflect human longings. By ignoring this reality, Cronon concluded, wilderness preservation “in virtually all of its manifestations... represents a flight from history” (Cronon 1995).

Cronon's essay set the stage for the remarkable trend in contemporary environmentalism of seeking an approach "after preservation" (Minteer & Pyne 2015). In the fully humanized world of the anthropocene, such thinking runs, the preservationist imperative of 'letting be,' a wilderness ethos, is now impossible.¹ Instead, humans need to "accept responsibility" for the natural world *in contrast to* the (allegedly) outdated preservationist thought that shirks such responsibility.² Ned Hettinger (2021) calls this way of thinking "Age of Man Environmentalism" (AME). At times, AME proposals seem to be made with *relative* circumspection, while at other times they baldly endorse technology-centered planetary management. Most often, however, it's difficult to tell the difference. The most brazen example, arguably, of the AME trend is the 2015 *Ecomodernist Manifesto*. Here, the ecomodernists emphasize technological methods of decoupling economic growth from environmental destruction, stating that "to the degree to which there are fixed physical boundaries to human consumption, they are so theoretical to be functionally irrelevant" (Asafu-Adjaye, *et al* 2015). The ecomodernists explicitly center the anthropocene in their manifesto: *this fundamentally new epoch*— defined by human domination— *requires* planetary-scale human management.

In this paper, I turn such thinking on its head. Despite the significant differences in the details of how academics have defended this 21st century environmental AME outlook, they all represent the *true* flight from history; they too quickly jettison the ideas of historical environmentalists and so misunderstand the environmental values at the heart of preservation that are more salient than ever. Moreover, this radically 'new' environmentalism, in essence, has simply put a new coat of paint on dusty ideas. This often jubilant, sometimes anxious, yearning for unprecedented human innovation and— ultimately— *control* in our new millennia mirrors the Futurist movement that took off near the beginning of the last century. Just as the Futurists used the alleged "ontological rupture" wrought by the *speed* of new technologies to dress up their political vision as inescapable, many AMEs use the alleged "ontological rupture" of the anthropocene to dress up the longstanding ideal of the *anthropocene economy* as somehow *avant-garde* and the only possible way forward. By the "anthropocene economy," I mean a market-economy predicated on growth through exchange and technological innovation in the name of inalienable "progress." Ultimately, I contend that, insofar as the anthropocene concept enables the Futurism of AME thought, it should be avoided in environmental discourse, and challenged when it (inevitably) appears.

In advancing my argument, I first survey three prominent Futurist tropes as they were expressed by Fillip Tommaso Marinetti in the early 20th century. (1) There has been a radical ontological 'rupture'

¹ Following Ruddiman *et al* (2015) and Boersma (2022), I choose not to capitalize the anthropocene concept to indicate that I do not embrace the label, even if I find it necessary to discuss.

² An abridged selection of the literature I situate in this increasingly popular environmental trend: Botkin 1989; Callicott 1991; Meyer 2006; Brand 2009; Thompson 2009; Hobbs *et al.*, 2011; Lynas 2011; Marris 2011; Ellis 2011; Vogel 2015; Hamilton 2017; Kolbert 2021. It's debatable whether Cronon (1995) should also be included on this list. On the one hand, he was an early and influential advocate for finding an alternative to traditional preservationist thought and suggests that this "new" approach will be distinguished by its willingness to accept responsibility for the earth. On the other, he was mostly vague as to what "accepting responsibility" *meant*, and briefly suggested that honoring the wild— in my view, *the* central preservationist value— remained important.

from the past. (2) Looking to the past for wisdom and instruction is a useless endeavor. (3) The pursuit of progress, as defined by a particular vision of potentiality, is overridingly important. Then, I show how the rhetoric surrounding the anthropocene recapitulates the first Futurist motif— that of a radical ontological rupture— and likewise has been used to warrant the second and third. Yet, this jump from the ontological to the ethical is unjustified and serves only to forestall ethical argumentation and intellectual debate around the desirability of the futures AMEs pursue.

Importantly, the Futurist impulse in contemporary environmentalism is *not* universal but rather characteristic of specific habits of AME thinking *most* prominent in the West and especially the United States. Environmental Justice frameworks worldwide, emerging from the material struggle and grassroots activism of Black and Indigenous communities, affirm the importance of understanding history and reject AME's uncritical stance towards power.³ Moreover, as I will argue, the recent embrace of AME defangs American environmentalism's radical politics going back to its *earliest days*. This tradition *began* as Henry David Thoreau started to witness the initial signals of what would come to be called the anthropocene. His oft-caricatured claim that 'in wildness is the preservation of the world,' I contend, is in significant measure a critique of the anthropocene economy, while his celebration of how wild nature can transform and challenge the human perspective could hardly be more pressing in our increasingly technological world. We forget Thoreau's perspective— and the preservationists he inspired— at our peril. Insofar as the anthropocene concept often encourages such forgetting, it should be resisted. We should not embrace the Futurist folly that society has nothing to learn from the past, even as society must blaze its own path into the future.

The Rhetoric of Futurism

The writer Wendell Berry once said that the modern mind yearns for the future. Nothing captures this yearning more than the Futurist movement. The Italian Filippo Tommaso Marinetti famously founded this movement in 1909 upon the publication of *The Futurist Manifesto*. Change and "radical rupture" haunted and thrilled the futurists.⁴ "Beauty exists only in struggle," Marinetti declared in the seventh tenet of his manifesto. "Why should we look back over our shoulders, when we intend to breach the mysterious doors of the impossible? Time and space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, for we have already created velocity which is eternal and omnipresent" (Marinetti 1909, 51).

Within these lines, he invokes central rhetorical motifs that we will see also echo in today's environmentalism. First, the radical new world one might resist has *already* manifest, and so to pursue any alternative is to reject *reality*. Put differently, the *is* of the now has made obsolete the *ought* of the past. Second, and as a result, looking to the past for wisdom and instruction has *nothing to offer*. Rather, Marinetti insisted, "Put your faith in Progress, which is always right, even when it is wrong, because it is movement, life, struggle, hope" (Marinetti 1911, 100). This leads to a third motif: the overriding importance of the pursuit of *progress* as it is defined by a particular vision of positive change: "Poetry

³ Notably, environmental justice as a concept originated in the United States in response to the vastly disproportionate environmental hazards faced by the Black community. See Bullard 1990.

⁴ I borrow the language of "radical rupture" from recent anthropocene scholarship. See Hamilton, Gemenne, and Bonneuil 2015 and Boersma 2022.

must be conceived as a violent assault launched against unknown forces to reduce them to submission under man” (Marinetti 1909, 51). Here, Marinetti would express preference for a vision of human potentiality that Paul Wapner would call, the better part of a century later, the *dream of mastery*: the ambition “to render nature subject to our vision, will, and desire” (Wapner 2010, 8). As Marinetti expressed this vision: “we are collaborating with mechanics in destroying the old poetry of distance and wild solitudes, the exquisite nostalgia of departure, and in its place we urge the tragic lyricism of ubiquity and omnipresent speed” (Marinetti 1911b, 94).

Evident here is that, to Marinetti, prior to any politics Futurism epitomized a *gut feeling*, a *desire*, a *lust*, and an *attunement* to basic realities. But to be sure, Marinetti believed a politic followed. The Futurist’s “only political program is pride, energy, and national expansions,” Marinetti declared in 1915. Moreover, this program demanded *action*. “Futurist poets, painters, sculptors, and musicians of Italy! Leave aside your poems, paintbrushes, chisels, and orchestras for as long as the war lasts. The red vacations of genius have begun! We can admire nothing, today, except the formidable symphonies of shrapnel and the mad sculptures that our inspired artillery will pour down on the enemy masses” (Marinetti 1915, 216). This may all sound familiar; many scholars have recognized the intellectual and rhetorical similarities between Futurism and Fascism. The connection is hard to miss. Four years later, Marinetti would co-author the *Manifesto of the Italian Fasci of Combat*, commonly known as *The Fascist Manifesto*.

The Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, among others, once argued that the Futurist movement set the stage for Fascism: in “the resoluteness [Futurism] brought to the idea that one must get out into the streets, impose one’s viewpoint, shut up the voices of those who don’t agree... in that search for the new, that passionate desire to break with every tradition” (Rainey 2009a). The Futurist abandoned caution, dispelled tradition, and believed progress inalienable— at whatever cost. Moreover, the mobilization of power that Marinetti worshipped *had* to concentrate somewhere: “Grasp the wheel!” Marinetti cries, “I proclaim you the driver of the world!” (Marinetti 1909b, 56). Benito Mussolini was simply the man of the moment to accept this sweeping charge. Ultimately, despite some genuine tensions between the original Futurism of Marinetti and the Fascism of Mussolini,⁵ it is hardly any surprise that they would find themselves political bedfellows.

Is Futurism relevant today? One may think not. For instance, Lawrence Rainey suggests that Futurism “offered not a history of beginnings and developments, but a protracted series of endings.... Alluring, vulgar, ludicrous, chilling, monstrous, farcical, grim,” it may have been, “but it remains one of the great dead ends of modernism” (Rainey 2009, 47). Yet, its characteristic rhetoric seems to have endured across the decades, surviving Marinetti. To offer one example, the transhumanist FM-2030 published the Futurist manifesto *Up-Wingers* in 1973 as F.M. Esfandiary. He begins this work exuberantly: “I have been told that I am *too* optimistic about the future. How can anyone be too optimistic? My regret is that I am not optimistic enough” (Esfandiary 1973, 1). He then proceeds to

⁵ Tensions indeed exist. For example, Giuseppe Prezzolini argued in 1923 that despite how “Fascism has contained some elements of Futurism,” the two movements are in essential ways opposite: “Fascism... wants hierarchy, tradition, and observance to authority.... Futurism is a protest against tradition” (Prezzolini 1923, 175).

retread the same tropes of Marinetti fifty years earlier. First, he insists that change once deemed impossible and foolish to pursue has *already* happened: “transcendence is no longer a metaphysical concept. It has become reality” (4). Second, he infers, “these new dimensions in human life defy all our philosophies— all our social economic political systems— all our age-old concepts of life and nature— Time and Space” (5). And third, again following Marinetti’s obsession with unrelenting progress— “We have to shake the doors of life to test their hinges and bolts!”— Esfandiary rejects all precepts that the human being is governed by nature, evolution, flesh and blood bodies, mortality, or even the confines of this planet (Marinetti 1909, 49).

F.M. Esfandiary further hypothesized that now irrelevant was the roundly conservative spectrum of the political right and left. Today there was only up and down: those who would follow Marinetti’s call to challenge the stars, and those who would embrace a “back-to-earth purism— a reactionary resistance to all progress” (Esfandiary 1973, 38). Whether it was those on the right venerating tradition or those on the left worshipping bureaucracy, both the right wing and left wing often denied change, worshipped received wisdom, and resisted progress. The predominate politics of his day, he believed, were those of the down-wingers, and this is what the up-wing challenged. Moreover, *this* was the political dialectic that would define the future: not the right and left.

Even though the up/down wing has not *replaced* the right/left wing, Esfandiary still seems to have been impressively prescient: the up-wing of futurism is still very alive today, in continuous conflict with the back-to-earthers. Thought-leaders such as Elon Musk are often depicted (and sometimes self-characterize) as Futurists. Yet, as Matthew Rozsa for *Salon* suggests, the label of Futurist is sometimes misapplied to describe any superficial similarity between the technophile and the Marinetti flavor of Futurist. Still, Musk’s Futurism is not superficial; he echoes the classic Futurist call that the world is changing, that old ideas must die, and that technology will *define* the future.⁶

‘Age of Man’ Environmentalism

Up to this point, I have described the rhetoric and politics of Futurism as they have manifest in the 20th century, and then demonstrated their enduring influence in the new millennia. Regarding the latter, allow me to be a bit more precise. Recall that the original Futurism of Marinetti has three recurring rhetorical motifs. (1) There has been a radical ontological ‘rupture’ from the past. (2) Looking to the past for wisdom and instruction is a useless endeavor. (3) The pursuit of progress, as defined by a

⁶ Futurist, upwing ideology is common in contemporary political thought more generally. For example, Nick Bostrom has argued that avoiding existential risks should be a political priority, which entails not only preventing human extinction but also ensuring a world in which human beings achieve “economic productivity and control over nature close to the maximum that could feasibly be achieved” (Bostrom 2013, 19). Inspired by Bostrom, William MacAskill and Toby Ord have popularized the Futurist-skewed morality of “longtermism,” which they have defined as “the view that the most important determinant of the value of our actions today is how those actions affect the very long-run future” (MacAskill 2019). Recently, longtermism has proven influential even outside of academia. Writing for *VICE*, Edward Ongweso Jr (2022) has described longtermism as a “Tech Elite Ideology,” not only due to endorsements from Elon Musk and disgraced FTX CEO Sam Bankman-Fried, but because of its general popularity at Ivy League Institutions and in Silicon Valley.

particular vision of positive change, is overridingly important. In this section, I show how the first motif of “radical rupture” appears in contemporary Futurist thought most prominently in anthropocene-centered theorizing and has served to warrant motifs two and three.

There is a tendency in contemporary environmentalism to fixate on endings and beginnings; for instance, countless ecologists, philosophers, and environmental thinkers perceive humanity has reached “the end of nature” where we enter the “terra incognita” of a “post-wild,” “no-analogue” world that requires a new conservation “after preservation” (McKibben 1989; Crutzen 2002; Marris 2011; Williams & Jackson 2007; Minter & Pyne 2015). Within this tradition, in 2000 Paul J. Crutzen christened a new era for the planet: “*the Anthropocene*,” the age of man. This new geological epoch, Crutzen suggested, was distinguished from the Holocene by the imprint of human impacts. At his time of writing, the human population was 6 billion and rising, about 30-50% of the planet’s land surface was exploited by humans, more than half of accessible fresh water was being used by humanity, more nitrogen fertilizer was applied in agriculture than was fixed naturally in all terrestrial ecosystems, and fossil-fuel burning had increased carbon dioxide by 30%— the highest levels in 400 millennia (Crutzen). Human impacts have, of course, only increased since. In this radically new era, Crutzen contended, human beings had come to dominate the planet.

Even upon the anthropocene’s very first appearance, before it had the chance to capture the zeitgeist, it was not a normatively neutral term. Crutzen explained in the original article that the lesson to be learned from his analysis was that scientists and engineers now had the imperative to guide society towards global sustainable management, which “may well” involve “large-scale geo-engineering projects” that could be used to optimize climate. His seminal paper played a large role in setting the tone for ‘Age of Man Environmentalism.’ In a human-dominated planet, AMEs insist, there is no ‘letting be,’ no shirking the immense responsibility our power, as a species, has brought us. To borrow the skin-crawling words of Christian scholar Jay McDaniel (1993), the new epoch has humanity “doomed to dominion” (74-75).

Now, to be clear, not all among the AME thinkers are inclined to agree with McDaniel that this new human role is one to *lament*. On the contrary, some are inclined to embrace the new age with Futurist enthusiasm. Erle Ellis, for example, insists that “we must not see the anthropocene as a crisis, but as the beginning of a new geological epoch ripe with human-directed opportunity” (Ellis 2011). Erle Ellis counts himself among a cohort of environmental thinkers who self-identify as ecomodernists and, in their manifesto, declare the conviction that “knowledge and technology, applied with wisdom, might allow for a good, or even great, anthropocene” (Araya-Adjaye, *et al* 2015). The journalist Mark Lynas, another co-author, elsewhere argues that humans must now become “the God Species” if the Earth and its life is to thrive (Lynas 2011).

This is the tone Emma Marris, Peter Kareiva, Joseph Mascaro, and Erle Ellis adopt in their 2011 *New York Times* editorial, writing “This is the Earth we have created, and we have a duty, as a species, to protect it and manage it with love and intelligence” (Marris, *et al.* 2011). However, as the title of their op-ed suggests (“Hope in the Age of Man”), this awesome responsibility should invite not fear and despair, but *hope*: the world, after all, is in our hands. As Mark Lynas says, “the first responsibility of a

conquering army is always to govern” (Lynas 2011, 13). Human beings are our own obstacle, and our own salvation. Human domination is inevitable, but it can yet avoid cruelty or capriciousness if we do our job well. “The Age of Humans,” Lynas explains, “need not be an era of hardship and misery; we can nurture and protect.” But doing so requires *acknowledging our own role as planetary conquerors*. This may sound arrogant, but in the eyes of the ecomodernists it’s simply pragmatic. As such, according to Lynas, “false humility is a more urgent danger than hubris” (10).

In rather stark contrast, some AMEs describe humanity’s new responsibility with far more trepidation, even as they insist that the burden is the species’ to bear. Jeremy Baskin (2015) suggests distinguishing between ‘Promethean’ and ‘Aidosean’ visions of the anthropocene, the former named for the Greek god of forethought who gifted the *technē* of fire to humanity and the later for the Greek goddess of shame, modesty, and humility. While the Prometheans embrace humanity’s responsibility with eagerness, the Aidoseans tend to more readily recognize biophysical limits and may adopt “a more humble outlook regarding the place of humanity” (14). Baskin sees the Aidosean anthropocene outlook exemplified implicitly by Alex Steffen and coauthors in their 2011 paper, who argue that humanity’s management of the planet should aim to return it to the Holocene (Steffen, *et al.* 2011). Allen Thompson also deviates from the Promethean outlook when he argues that the end of nature beckons the “unwelcome recognition that humanity now bears an awesome responsibility for the flourishing of life on Earth,” and contends our very anxiety “bodes well for humanity” (Thompson 2009, 97). And Emma Marris, despite co-signing a Promethean proclamation, toys with the Aidosean persuasion when she “hope[s]” that much of the rambunctious garden of planet Earth, tended by humans, will remain “unweeded and untidy” (Marris 2011, 131). I would use the word *wild*. Paradoxically, then, Marris hopes for wildness enduring in her ‘post-wild’ world.

Still, despite the differences in tone between Promethean and Aidosean AME, they both entertain the planetary mastery Marinetti, Esfandiari, Bostrom, and Musk share. Therefore, in a salient sense, both anthropocene outlooks amount to a mere difference in tone; as Baskin points out, they are points on a common spectrum and share the quality of being “technophilic and planetary-management in orientation” (Baskin 2015, 14). Allen Thompson may recommend humans proceed anxiously in the anthropocene, but only in the same sense that a parent should proceed anxiously as they rear a child (Thompson 2009, 131).⁷ Emma Marris may hope to leverage planetary management in the service of wildness, but by endorsing planetary management she still seems to retain the arrogant belief that humanity can, in Wapner’s words, “completely manage nature’s affairs and make nature operate according to human dictates.” She fails to see that wildness cannot be ‘imparted by human hegemony’ but rather “emerges through a [respectful] relationship with the nonhuman world” (Wapner 2010, 156). As Christopher Preston comments, “Rambunctious or not, gardening is always circumscribed by a particular human vision” (Preston 2015, 320). Global gardening, therefore, remains a dream of mastery. It encourages us, in the words of Marinetti, to “grasp the wheel!”

⁷ There likely is some salience to the parent/child, humanity/nature analogue, but one central place of disanalogy is that human beings are *certainly* not responsible for the earth in the same way a parent is responsible for a child. Yet, unfortunately, this is a possible point of similarity that Thompson endorses.

Constitutive of AME is a rejection of traditional environmental thinking and its respect for wild nature (Hettinger 2021). Age of man environmentalists, wherever they lie along the Promethean/Aidosean spectrum, reject what Paul Wapner calls the ‘dream of naturalism’: the “ideal of harmonizing with, rather than imposing themselves on, nature” (Wapner 2010, 54). This is the sensibility that humans “live best when we align ourselves with the natural world,” and it lies at the heart of the traditional environmentalism Americans inherited from thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold (Wapner 2010). This is the beating heart of the down-wing. AMEs rejects the dream of naturalism not simply because it is undesirable (although the Prometheans in particular might believe that) but because it is *impossible* and *antiquated*. The desire to protect and promote wild nature, they claim, is wishful nostalgia in the 21st century when humans have so extensively impacted their environment. As Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger write: “The issue is not whether humans *should* control Nature, for that is inevitable, but rather *how* humans should control natures—nonhuman and human” (Nordhaus & Shellenberger 2007, 135). In so doing, AMEs— Promethean and Aidosean both— echo the Futurist motif of Marinetti and Esfandiary: the “is” has render the ‘ought’ obsolete.

The *speed* of the modern-day seems to have enraptured the classical and neo-Futurists, whether the speed of Marenetti’s automobile or the speed of 21st century environmental change. In both cases, ontological rupture is invoked to forestall ethical argumentation and intellectual debate; the *is* becomes the *ought*. Keje Boersma (2022) reconstructs the AME reasoning as follows: “because we live on a fully humanized planet already, as a result of past and present human interventions, and because we have crossed a threshold in this regard, the only responsible course of action is to intervene consciously, to be that dominant presence in the most deliberate manner” (205). Environmental change, AMEs claim, has rendered the normative possibility of a non-technological future a thing of the past. The up-wing becomes the only way forward. In this way, the “radical rupture” serves the same role today as it did for Marinetti: if a new reality has arrived, that new reality needs not to be *pursued* but only *accepted*. Futurism’s first motif— changing ontology— therefore continues to imply the irrelevance of traditional thought and the imperative of technological and ideological revolution.

As I will argue, this inference is erroneous, and represents a striking flight from history; it ignores that the *original* environmentalism for the age of man began in the mid-19th century just *as* the extent of humans’ ability to impact their environment— and the scale of environmental change— was becoming clear. Far from *precluding* preservation, the accelerating anthropocene was its *impetus*. Recognizing the profound philosophical implications of an age of man is *not* contemporary, as the AME’s would have you believe, but rather is what called the progenitors of the environmental movement— like Thoreau— to action.

Thoreau: The First Anthropocene Writer?

Ironically, ‘the brave new ethical world’ of the anthropocene is nothing new. As Crutzen himself points out, the notion that humanity was influencing the environment in profound ways dates to 1873 at least, when the Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani considered contemporary societal impacts to rival “the greater forces of earth,” and so announced a new ‘anthropozoic era’ (Crutzen 2002). Nor was it new,

even in Stoppani's time, for philosophers to reflect on the moral implications of humanity's increasing influence on the planet. This *isn't* to say that the *extent* of the environmental crisis, or that of human influence, is the *same* today as it was in the 19th century. Rather, it's to say that public alarm regarding the extent of human impacts on the environment, and their ramifications, is not new. Nor, critically, is sustained thinking about how to reverse this "anthropocene" trend.

Widely considered the progenitor of the modern wilderness movement and American environmentalism, Henry David Thoreau could plausibly be called the first anthropocene writer. Moreover, even according to Paul J. Crutzen, Thoreau lived in time to witness the first stage of the human environmental impacts characteristic of the anthropocene. When Thoreau retreated to Walden Pond in 1845, evidence of humanity was everywhere. The railroad whistle sounded across its tranquil waters while his nearby neighbors heated their fine China tea on stoves fueled with coal. By the time he died in 1862, his beloved woods had been clear cut and the nearby rivers powered cotton mills. Born 17 years after the close of the eighteenth century, Thoreau came into the world at the perfect time to bear witness to a profoundly new era of revolutionary technology and exploding industry serving the steadily growing colonization of Euro-American values over the human and nonhuman world, planet-wide.

Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond is best understood as an experiment in living a life of simplicity, one he believed in his soul to be good. Critically, however, Thoreau did *not* believe that simplicity or retreating to nature was the *only* good way to live, or even necessarily that it was the best way to live—contrary to popular depictions. Rather, he passionately believed in the value of *change*, in different ways of being. "So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life," Thoreau writes, that we "deny... the possibility of change" (Thoreau 2004, 9). This instinct is harmful, however, even if it is common. He continues: "This is the only way, we say: but there are as many ways [to live] as there can be drawn radii from one centre. All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant." When Thoreau pleaded to his audience to adventure into simplicity, he did so because he knew it to be the most radical act of transformation possible within his generation's market-run, insatiable culture ever-desperate for increasing opulence.

What Thoreau perceived is the early fallout of the *anthropocene economy*: a market-economy predicated on growth through exchange and technological innovation in the name of inalienable progress, an ideal tightly associated with Futurist thought as I have shown. The anthropocene economy hums on today and has at least since the industrial revolution and James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1784. While the anthropocene economy has its vocal critics—namely, anti-capitalism and the de-growth movement⁸—it is defended bluntly by the Promethean ecomodernists who emphasize the importance of *decoupling* human well-being (quantified in economic terms) from the destruction of nature (Araya-Adjaje, *et al* 2015, 18). Specifically, they perceive the tight correlation of energy consumption with rising incomes and living standards and conclude that high energy use is required for human development. Of course, this high energy consumption is *also* tightly correlated with environmental destruction—historically, we owe the anthropocene and our myriad environmental

⁸ These two antagonists to the anthropocene economy are conceptually distinct, although they have plenty of overlap in practice (e.g., Schmelzer, Vansintjan & Vetter 2022).

problems to the anthropocene economy— but the ecomodernists insist this *can* change. In this way, the ecomodernists reveal their propensity to see certain historical trends as inevitably fixed (economic growth = human wellbeing), and other as changeable (economic growth = environmental destruction).⁹

However, as Thoreau perceived the anthropocene emerge from the skyrocketing industrial economy, he began to question the connection between economic growth, technology, and human wellbeing the ecomodernists take for granted. Even as Thoreau saw the overwhelming ability of growing technology to fulfill human desires, he questioned the single-minded pursuit of such desires in the first place. Some consider it strange that Thoreau began *Walden* with the chapter “Economy.” On the one hand, I can’t recall at this point how many people have told me that they tried reading *Walden* but just couldn’t get through the first chapter, presumably a consequence of its length and the tedium of ledgers. On the other hand, a discussion of economy seems hardly thematic for a collection of nature essays. So, why begin with it? The answer is simple: *Walden* is not, fundamentally, a collection of nature essays. After all, Thoreau doesn’t introduce the reader to the pond at all until almost a third of the narrative is past— as Bill McKibben points out.¹⁰

Rather, as I hinted earlier, *Walden* is a celebration of moral *transformation*. In her definitive biography of Thoreau, Laura Dassow Walls illustrates this with her usual eloquence:

Bending Walden toward the cycle of rebirth meant opening it to seasonal change and the ways that living ‘in season’ alters the rhythm of living and thinking. As winter drives life ‘into a corner,’ it proves not ‘mean’ but rich and warm. The narrator surrounds his hearth with visitors, including the freed slaves and impoverished laborers whose circle he has joined and the ‘brute neighbors’ who shelter besides him, like the wasps he accepts until they disappear into the cracks. The human ‘economy’ of his first chapter thus enlarges to a new concept— not ‘eco-nomia,’ or management of the household, but ‘eco-logia,’ ecology, the speaking of the household, composed of a thousand voices: mice and wasps, rabbits and squirrels, jays and chickadees, and also his human friends. (Walls 2017, 354).

The central conceit of *Walden*, I argue, is exactly the shift Wall underlines here: from the managerial ethos of the *economy* to the relational ethos of *ecology*, although Thoreau never used this latter word. In the anthropocene economy, Thoreau believed people were so focused on control— the pursuit and realization of their desires— they failed to appreciate the diversity of lives around them, and so failed to imagine other *ways of living*. In other words, the anthropocene economy stymied the wild’s remarkable ability to transform one’s perspective.¹¹ During and after his visit to Walden, Thoreau became a pioneer of ecology well before the field’s existence, and yet the more he understood natural science the more he longed for something *beyond* understanding” (Walls 2017, XV).

⁹ Of course, arguments can (and have) been given to justify this asymmetry, but far too often this highly contestable outlook is simply taken for granted.

¹⁰ Thoreau 2004, p. 80 (footnote).

¹¹ Bryan Norton refers to this as *transformative value*. See Norton 1988, chapter 10.

One of Thoreau's most powerful ideas, as expressed in *Walden*, is that control— whether in the name of personal wellbeing or a larger Good— can be duplicitous, insofar as pursuing one's desires can inadvertently undermine one's more general wellbeing or other objective (moral) goods. Human ends, themselves, are often parochial or cruel and not always worth pursuing. This is what Thoreau meant when he famously said that “our inventions... are but improved means to an unimproved end” (Thoreau 2004, 48).¹² He saw the railroad as emblematic not only of the extreme environmental and technological change happening world-wide, but of what might be lost during the cold pursuit of efficiency. The railroad may enable economic growth, but not without loss: “All the Indian huckleberry hills are stripped, all the cranberry meadows are raked into the city. Up comes the cotton, down goes the woven cloth... up come the books; but down goes the wit that writes them” (110). Moreover, for all the benefits of the railroad's construction, far greater costs will befall those forced to build it: “when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over” (Thoreau 2004, 49).

Wild nature, however, provides a critical antidote to the provincial and narrow-minded, and is worth protecting on such grounds. “To make a railroad round the world available to all mankind is equivalent to grading the whole surface of the planet,” Thoreau declared (49). More generally, technology could be no salvation so long as humanity was enraptured with any single, unchanging, unimproved vision of the good. This idea was at the center of Thoreau's original anthropocene philosophy.

The Anthropocene's Flight from History

Revisiting the thinking of Thoreau should bestow multiple lessons. First, the *descriptive* referent of the anthropocene is *not all that new*, and *nor* is thinking about the lessons to be learned from it. Second, and following from the first, there is *more than one* ethical attitude one can adopt regarding the advent of the anthropocene. The *moral humility* Thoreau asks us to adopt— that there are many ways to live, that our vision of the good is fallible, and that our vision of the good may be merely one among many— makes this clear.

There's a third lesson to glean from Thoreau. The moral transformation he experienced at Walden Pond did not require “pristine” Wilderness, but only the wildness of nature-contact unavailable in nearby Concord. Many have laughed that Thoreau's curated self-image as a grisly wilderness man is deluded considering Walden Pond's proximity to Concord— a brisk 20-minutes by foot. However, Thoreau never cast himself in this way. In fact, he did not speak all that much about “wilderness,” although the misconception that he did endures. His famous line is often misquoted as “in *Wilderness* is the preservation of the world.” Rather, he said *wildness*. Furthermore, the word “wilderness” appears only thirteen times in his two most famous environmental works (“Walking” and *Walden*) combined, and never to describe the lake or himself. Meanwhile, the words “wild” and “wildness” appear countless

¹² Thoreau 2004, p. 48.

times.¹³ The subtlety of moralists is often (intentionally) mistaken for hypocrisy; and, alas, Thoreau was an unabashed moralist.

Unfortunately, such unnuanced portrayals of Thoreau do not contain themselves to the court of public opinion; on the contrary, they influence the way even serious scholars see Thoreau. Baird Callicott and Michael Nelson, for example, depict Thoreau to be among a line of American environmentalists that *both* commit themselves to dualism *and*, accordingly, to the view that wilderness and humanity are dichotomistically opposed (Callicott & Nelson 1997). On the contrary, as argued, Thoreau's thinking was triggered by the ever-increasing hybridity of civilization and wildness. An explicitly central task Thoreau takes up in his scholarship *is* the reconciliation of the romantic dualism he inherited from Wordsworth and Emerson with the naturalism of the ecology he would pioneer (Miller 1961, 4). As Bryan Norton points out, Thoreau stood at a crossroads in American thought (Norton 1994, 34). He straddled two paradigms, and he knew it. Randall Fuller conveys the uneasy dissonance he faced thusly:

One night in 1851, Henry David Thoreau woke from a dream. In it, astride two ungovernable horses— literal nightmares— he galloped through the woods, 'but the horses bit each other and occasioned endless trouble and anxiety, and it was my employment to hold their heads apart.' (Fuller 2017, 349).

The conflict between the emotion of romanticism and the rationality of naturalism was so painful for Thoreau because he could not accept either as closer to his heart.¹⁴ While his intimacy with Emerson and the man's ideas was undeniable, Thoreau's boyhood was filled with "nature studies" long before they met. Moreover, as he aged, he seemed to begin favoring his youthful sensibilities. Only a week prior to his dream, Thoreau journaled: "I fear that the character of my knowledge is from year to year becoming more distinct and scientific— that in exchange for views as wide as heaven's scope, I am being narrowed down to the field of the microscope" (Fuller 2017, 349). He wrote these words four years before *Walden's* publication.

Finally, this allows me to establish the main thesis of this paper. In ignoring this long history of anthropocene reckoning, the AME commits the Futurist folly of trying to forge the future *ex nibilo* by focusing exclusively on the future at the expense of the past (Hourdequin 2021, 12). In this way, William Cronon got it the exact wrong way around when he accuses "the idea of wilderness"—the antithesis to AME— of flying from history. As I argue elsewhere, wilderness as it has been conceptualized and defended by classic environmentalists has been primarily about the promotion and preservation of a wildness that is relational and relative.¹⁵ The death of 'pristine nature' does not signal the 'end of

¹³ Or, rather, it would be functionally uncountable without modern technology. Excluding its appearance as the root of *wilderness*, Thoreau uses the word "wild" or "wildness" 80 times in *Walden* and 45 times in "Walking."

¹⁴ This metaphor of two ungovernable horses harkens back to Plato's *Phaedrus*.

¹⁵ Obst in preparation. See also, Rolston 1991; Weurthner, Crist & Butler 2014; Woods 2017; Hailwood 2018; Hettinger 2021.

environmentalism; on the contrary, as stated, the dream of naturalism at the heart of environmentalism *began* as people saw the impossibility of pristine nature.

Now seems a good opportunity to address an important objection to my central thesis. I have argued that the AME discourse that has become bound up in the concept of the anthropocene is neo-Futurist insofar as it ignores a long history of human beings wrestling with the philosophical and moral implications of their rapidly changing environment. I then offered Henry David Thoreau as a guiding example. However, one might object to this claim on the grounds that the anthropocene as it manifests today *is* descriptively different than it was in the 19th century (Zimmer 2022). This claim deserves some brief scrutiny. On one reading this is *obviously true*. The degree of ecological instability today *is* certainly *different*, i.e., more extreme, than it was in the mid-19th century. Yet, the concept of the anthropocene does not denote *mere difference*, but rather is “often treated as a radical rupture of reality” (Boersma 2022).¹⁶ The name ‘anthropocene’ derives from the Greek roots “man” and “new.” Therefore, if the objection runs that Thoreau did not encounter the anthropocene we face today, there must be something radically *new* today that he never witnessed.

But what could this be? I have already granted that the degree of ecological instability is *more extreme* today than it was in Thoreau’s time, but this is a matter of *degree*— not an example of radical rupture. Even *granting* that the dynamics of earth’s systems today are sufficiently different in kind from the Holocene to comprise a new epoch, something that is very much up for debate,¹⁷ it seems *far* more tenuous to insist the radical rupture has occurred *since* Thoreau’s death. As I have argued, Thoreau was one of the earliest and most influential people to think seriously about the “the increasing impact of mankind” and the “growing role of human brain-power in shaping its own future and environment” (Crutzen 2002). Considering it is exactly these “radical” trends that Crutzen, and others, believed the anthropocene makes stark, then the anthropocene Thoreau encountered is fundamentally the same phenomenon the AMEs regard today.

Yet, the anthropocene concept has come to obscure this fact. The anthropocene is dangerous because it symbolically provides the radical rupture Futurists have long used to justify jettisoning received wisdom and instead pursuing their particular vision of progress with reckless abandon. I hope to have convinced my reader that this is a rhetorical slight-of-hand, as erroneous as it is compelling. And it *has* been compelling. The close ideological relationship between the anthropocene concept and Futurism is reflected in AME’s tendency to recommend the pursuit of developing or even completely speculative technologies as solutions to the environmental crisis, in their outright dismissal of traditional environmentalist values—the natural, the wild, historical baselines— and their talk of *terra incognita*. A radically new world, they insist, requires “radical” new solutions. Yet, regarding the immensity of human impacts on the natural world *need not* lead you to planetary management and a Futurist’s dream of

¹⁶ See also, Hamilton, Gemenne, and Bonneuil 2015.

¹⁷ E.g., Santana 2019.

mastery, as AME assumes, but to prizing the value of wild nature more than ever before.¹⁸ The whole history of American environmentalism is proof of this.¹⁹

Conclusion

I wish to return now to the themes of humility and arrogance. The fundamental flaw with the anthropocene, as it has come to define the zeitgeist at least, is the arrogance it encourages. The anthropocene continues to be used as a rhetorical tool to promote a radical kind of conceptual anthropocentrism characteristic of the AMEs, where the *only* possible way forward is for human values to colonize the entire world via planetary management.

I have argued that revisiting the thinking of Henry David Thoreau serves as a therapy to both forms of arrogance. In inviting us to experiment with other ways of living and to expose ourselves to the wild agencies of the world, Thoreau reveals the contingency and fallibility of human values and worldviews; and, further, provides serious reason for caution against pursuing a Synthetic Age where human designs *truly* dominate the planet.²⁰ As Jason Mark warns, such a planet would be like a “world of mirrors” where humans “look around and see only themselves” and their values (Mark 2016, 35). This considered, the *pursuit* of an artificial world becomes a display of incredible moral arrogance. Of course, a *fully* controlled world is impossible, as even the most ardent Futurists usually acknowledge. In fact, probably the *most* serious risk of perusing the ecomodernist vision is not that it will *succeed*, but that it will *fail*— catastrophically. The unfettered economic and technological growth they celebrate poses perhaps the greatest *actual* danger of human extinction or near-extinction. Still, *even if the Futurists succeed*, it will be at a great moral loss. *An overwhelmingly artificial* world deprived of wildness *is* possible, as is a planet that has been made less diverse and less vibrant because one of its species attempted to impose their singular vision of the good over the entire planet.

In section two, I chose to discuss the connection between Futurism and Fascism for a reason. As I said then, the mobilization of power that the Futurists worship *has* to concentrate somewhere. In early 20th century Italy, it was in the hands of Mussolini. Today, power concentrates in the hands of a *tiny* number of wealthy elites— an inegalitarian reality that neo-Futurists have little interest in correcting. On the contrary, the AME vision of ‘planetary managers’ would only enlarge the outsized influence of the elite. In this way, Futurists are not revolutionists, but rather *accelerationists*: they seek an acceleration of already existing trends: economic growth, technological advancement, and the monopolization of power. Paradoxically, then, Futurists are *conservative*. Amia Srinivisan deftly captures this idea in her critique of MacAskill’s Futurist-flavor of effective altruism: “But effective altruism... has been a conservative movement.... MacAskill does not address the deep sources of global misery— international trade and finance, debt, nationalism, imperialism, racial and gender-based subordination, war, environmental degradation, corruption, exploitation of labor— or the forces that

¹⁸ Stephen Gardiner points out that *even if* humanity’s new environmental influence calls for totally new virtues, it does not necessarily follow we should *aspire* to such virtues (Gardiner, 2021). After all, they may be far beyond our ability.

¹⁹ This isn’t to suggest that we shouldn’t be critically revisiting and reconsidering wild(er)ness and its value. For one excellent example of this enterprise, see Van Horn and Hausdoerffer, 2017.

²⁰ The concept of the *Synthetic Age* is attributable to Preston, 2017.

ensure its reproduction. Effective altruism doesn't try to understand how power operates, except to better align itself with it. In this sense, it leaves everything just as it is" (Srinivasan 2015, 5). So, too, does the neo-Futurism of the AMEs.

By way of closing, I wish to suggest one final lesson we might learn from Thoreau. By embracing the neo-Futurism of anthropocene thought, we risk forgetting that the conceptual crisis wrought by the critical environmental situation is *not* the first conceptual crisis humans have encountered as a species. There have been many, of course, but Thoreau went through one of the most profound: that invited by the tension between Romanticism and Empiricism. By the end of his life, Thoreau went far in dispelling this conflict by realizing that the mystery and wonder he so valued in Romantic philosophy could survive the end of its dualism. In the paper read most widely in his lifetime, Thoreau described the method by which plants diversify and root through the dispersion of seedlings. This remarkable phenomenon showed him that nature was in a state of "constant *new* creation."²¹ Nature's vital force now appeared all the greater, and so increased his admiration. "Though I do not believe that plant will spring up where no seed has been," he wrote, "I have great *faith* in a seed" (Thoreau 1860). While Thoreau did not denounce Emerson's dualistic transcendentalism, by his early death he was convinced the value of wild nature could stand without it. Thoreau never jettisoned the nightmares of the past *or* the future, even as they bit and struggled against one another. Rather, he strove for reconciliation and, in its absence, learned to accept the discomfort of tension. This sage approach invites us to leave Futurism in the past, and the anthropocene with it.²²

²¹ The Journal of Henry David Thoreau (October 18, 1860). Available at shorturl.at/jIJ26.

²² For one example of a form of anthropocene reckoning that attempts to balance genuinely changing environmental circumstances with historical values and cultural learning, see Schmidt *et al.*, 2016.

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