Conclusion
Reading as Rescaling

The studies I have offered in this book suggest that fiction is not only a technology of scale but a site of trans-scalar ethics. As Michaela Bronstein points out, fiction's role in the context of our current ecological crisis 'is about not only what it shows us but also what it asks of us'.[1] What, then, does this fiction ask of us? The multi-scalar poetics I have analysed are representations of epistemic and ontological complexity, but they are also rhetorical moves. What this rhetoric asks of the reader is response-ability towards those scales that are difficult to perceive: the threatened species and its knots of ethical time, the microscopic chemistry of soil or forest, the self as species and as ecosystem, and the invisible threads that entangle life in relations of co-dependency, from the microbial to the planetary. One mode of reading that is stimulated by this fiction is what Jennifer Wenzel calls 'reading for the planet': an ethos of reading that works 'between specific sites, across multiple divides, at more than one scale', and which becomes 'a dynamic process of *rescaling*'.[2] I suggest, however, that this fiction enables a more radical process of rescaling which does not prioritise the planet but, rather, encourages non-hierarchical relations across multi-scalar perspectives. Planetarity is only one of the multiple scales that may, through the experience of reading, exert more ethical traction on us. Those scales are both physical and temporal: they include the incommensurable scales of different species' evolution, the slow violence of anthropogenic ecosystemic disruption, and the complex temporal scales of interspecies and intergenerational ethics.

The symbiopolitical value of these poetics is not only that they broaden their readers' ecological sensibilities but that they stimulate response-ability towards multiple scale-bound perspectives. Reading, here, may develop a capacity to multiply perspectives and consider them equally worthy of consideration. This process does more than weaken the domination of the

[1] Bronstein, 'Taking the Future into Account', p. 126. [2] Wenzel, *Disposition of Nature*, p. 2.

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human scale because it can hold together the incompatible perspectives of different locations, species, populations, and generations. Scalar irony, which I defined in Chapter 6 as a de-hierarchising awareness of discordant perspectives, is therefore a key eco-political ability enabled by this fiction. If we read for representation, then several of the stories studied in this book offer vivid portrayals of the situational ironies of our current ecological condition, notably the contradiction between the daily actions of many Western individuals and their environmental awareness. If we consider it from a rhetorical point of view, this fiction stimulates a more general sense of scalar irony, which is a function of reading rather than a textual given.[3] Following Donna Haraway's and Bronislaw Szerszynski's conceptualisations, I understand irony here as a capacity to hold contradictory perspectives together, and to include one's own point of view in the ironic de-hierarchising of perspectives. Scalar irony is a mode of attentiveness that spreads outwards from the act of reading. As an active mode of awareness, it resists the temptation to frame the relation to nonhuman scales as a passive, contemplative experience. The scale of deep time, for instance, is often represented as sublime and awe-inspiring.[4] But this tendency, as Derek Woods points out, hinders the environmentalist project of making longer timescales 'politically legible'.[5] Bruno Latour even argues that the sublime should vanish, along with the illusion of our separation from 'Nature', in the face of Anthropocene awareness.[6] Scalar irony, as I have defined it, provides an alternative position to such distancing aesthetics because it provides no external point of view or stable position. But scalar irony also resists the temptation of scalar collapse, where one scale is perceived only through analogy with another. Through the ironic perspective, critical difference can be maintained within the analogies that I have highlighted, including the individual-as-species, the local-space-as-microcosm, and the environment-as-organism.

The fiction I have studied here, as it grapples with a multi-scalar view of life, is not satisfied by analogy. To grasp the entanglements of humans with microscopic life forms and planetary ecosystems, metaphorical figures are often too prompt to smooth over disjunctions between scales, or to dilute

[3] Linda Hutcheon argues that irony should be considered a function of reading because interpretation is an indispensable aspect of ironic textuality, whereas intention is not (*Irony's Edge*, pp. 116–17).

[4] See, for instance, the photograph illustrating Ialenti's BBC article about deep time, which shows a hiker gazing at a mountain range, in a pose reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above Sea Fog* – a Romantic image meant to convey the 'sense of awe' caused by 'deep time contemplation' (Ialenti, 'Benefits'). For the microscopic equivalent, see bio-artist Anna Dumitriu's reflections on the 'bacterial sublime', a feeling produced by the juxtaposition of the scale of epidemics with that of microbes ('Bacterial Sublime').

[5] Woods, 'Scale Critique for the Anthropocene, Part 2', p. 163.

[6] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 40.

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them in the reassuring illusion of scalability. Assumptions of microcosmic correspondences, in our relation to bodies or to landscapes, are disturbed by our awareness of catastrophic scale effects. As Daisy Hildyard writes in *The Second Body*, the current ecological crisis forces upon us a sense of generalised, mutual contamination: '[y]our body', she warns, 'is infecting the world – you leak'.[7] Microbes connect all organisms in living networks, lateral gene transfers deny hierarchies between species, and the polluting products of human existence are now present in almost all life forms on earth. If the notion of the Anthropocene marks an unprecedented self-awareness for humanity as a species, it also signals our troubling experience of being alienated from, and haunted by, the planetary scale of ourselves as a destructive force. In many ways, the fiction examined in this book highlights this sense of estrangement between character and species, and of a severance of individual story from history. As a result, the narrative mode of allegory is questioned, and other rhetorical moves come to the fore. Through these observations, my study contributes to recent work carried out in narratology on the divergence of individual characters from the story of humanity, and on the distrust of symbolic readings of the nonhuman.[8] It also strengthens those strands of scale theory that emphasise the limitations of analogy in scalar rhetoric.[9]

Critical synecdoche, ontological metalepsis, and scalar irony emerge from this book as key tools for a more-than-analogical poetics of scale, capable of highlighting the rifts between the domains they connect. Because these rhetorical moves problematise relations between part and whole, and between the discordant perspectives produced by different scales of observation, they foreground the need for response-ability across scales. Crucially, however, these poetics do not supplant analogical imaginaries: in the fiction I have explored, synecdoche, metalepsis, and irony work alongside metaphor and allegory. Wright's miasmatic poetics turns swans and humans into dysfunctional allegories for their respective species, caught up in metaleptic loops of contaminated identity. Boyle's satirical fiction finds scalar ironies in the allegorical, Gaia-like pretentions of the Ecosphere experiment, whose unviability leaves little hope for the future of 'spaceship Earth'. But these allegories need not be discarded: analogy remains an essential tool for imagining the relations between scales. It shapes our ecological imaginary, whether we picture our Anthropocene self as a destructive double or as a vast, second body on a planetary scale. It also

[7] Hildyard, *Second Body*, p. 40.
[8] See Vermeulen, 'Depopulating the Novel'; Caracciolo, *Contemporary Fiction*, p. 102.
[9] In particular work by Woods, Horton, and DiCaglio. See the Introduction and Chapter 1 of this book.

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structures our ecocritical and biocritical readings, where we perceive characters as personifications of humanity – allegories who might offer us models for better ethical relations with other forms and scales of life. Fiction, I suggest, can turn these analogical figures into pressure sites, where relations between scales are questioned and trans-scalar ethics develop.

I am wary of theoretical work which rejects one trope or narrative mode, as has been the case with synecdoche in certain strands of scale critique. Whereas some scale theorists assert that we should not 'commit' the mistake of synecdoche,[10] I have argued that the trope has a spectrum of possibility that ranges from *pars totalis* to *pars pro toto*. That spectrum gives synecdoche a capacity for critical relation – a potential for variance within the suggestion of similarity. This is why the footprint and the microcosm remain key tropes in contemporary fiction, as figures of thought that are troubled and renewed by twenty-first-century biopoetics. Conversely, it would be simplistic to reduce all allegorical readings to smooth zooms that erase differences between scales. Allegory may be viewed as an inherently conservative mode that reduces otherness to familiarity, but postmodernist thinkers have also theorised it, following Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, as a destabilising mode that 'fragments comparisons, and does not consolidate them'.[11] Given the breadth of allegory as a rhetorical category, Elizabeth DeLoughrey's assertion that 'allegory is the fundamental rhetorical mode for figuring [. . .] the historical rift between part and whole that is symbolised by the Anthropocene' is not antithetical to my argument.[12] Allegory also remains, as Catherine Bernard has theorised, a vital category through which to understand contemporary fiction's representation of the body politic through the individual body.[13] But I believe that we need to challenge and complexify allegorical modes of reading to understand the poetics of scale that are developing in contemporary fiction. My aim is not to force multi-scalar poetics into caricatural oppositions but to argue that literature's epistemic and ethical power lies precisely in its capacity to turn tropes and narrative strategies into sites of tension and negotiation. In the fiction I have examined here, one of the most striking examples of such negotiation sites is the planet figured as a mutilated body: the

[10] DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 155.

[11] Trambling, *Allegory*, p. 170. This vein of postmodernist scholarship views allegory as a trope that defers meaning and foregrounds the displacement effected by representation. By contrast, the ecocritical scholarship which provides the framework for my argument tends to posit a more rhetorical and often didactic conception of allegorical figures and narratives.

[12] DeLoughrey, *Allegories*, p. 18. [13] Bernard, *Matière à réflexion*, p. 18.

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reconstructed navel in 'A Stone Woman', the severed head of a cyborg in *The Stone Gods*, and the floating head of a child in *Winter* are tropes that merge a Gaian imaginary with the disturbing figure of the unbound body.[14] Through such images, fiction reworks both our allegorical, organicist relations to the planet and our microcosmic imagination of the human body, imbuing inherited figures with a shared vulnerability that revives and questions them simultaneously.

The miniature, impudent planet that haunts *Winter* returns briefly in Ali Smith's more recent novel *Summer* (2020). A few months into the Covid-19 pandemic, the pictures that attempt to 'approximate' the virus look, to the teenaged narrator Sacha,

> a bit like little planets with trumpets coming out of their surface, or little worlds covered in spikes of growth, a little world that's been shot all over its surface by those fairground darts with tuft tails from the old-fashioned rifle ranges, or like mines in the sea in films about WW2.[15]

These comparisons catch new viral imaginaries in the making. The list of images connects the microscopic parasite to the scale of the planet, and shifts from microbial to human threats. The implied reversibility of parasitism – viral or human? – is emblematic of the poetics of life that I have outlined, where relations across scales are characterised by unprecedented instability and met with unprecedented awareness. Smith's analogies are prolific, yet reticent in the midst of their exuberance: the pictures of the virus look *a bit like* worlds or mines. They are only human approximations, and the text does not settle on one of them, leaving the reader to navigate among them. Both virus and planet are caught up in human actions of creation and destruction, so that the image becomes a complex trope that points to all manner of hubris, violence, and recreation. Comparisons, Smith reminds us, can be seriously playful. They pave the way for irony and they may swerve, at any moment, away from amusing analogy and towards ethical questioning. Such slippages and hesitations are the living energy of this century's multi-scalar imagination.

[14] See Chapters 2 and 3 of this book, and Boxall's theorisation of the unbound body in *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, pp. 88–122.

[15] Smith, *Summer*, p. 40. For an in-depth analysis of the novel's engagement with pandemic imagery and the rhetoric of immunity, see Bernard, 'Vibrant Allegories'.

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