

# PREFACE: THE DECADE OF CRISIS

In 1962, Rachel Carson warned of ecological disaster in progress. Though not the first to raise the specter of imminent human-made environmental crisis, Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, had a decisive effect. It led the way in making concern about environmental crisis a national issue. By the 1970s, Robert Gottlieb writes: "the mood of environmental crisis seemed more and more overwhelming." Environmental crisis seemed to be written for all to see "in such disparate events of the late 1960s as the burning of the Cuyahoga River in the center of Cleveland, the eutrophication of Lake Erie, and the dying birds washed up on the oil-slicked shores of Santa Barbara."<sup>1</sup> In exactly this spirit, Senator Gaylord Nelson, originator of the idea of the first Earth Day (1970), argued that the environmental crisis "was the most critical issue facing mankind," making "Vietnam, nuclear war, hunger, decaying cities, and all the other major problems one could name...relatively insignificant by comparison."<sup>2</sup>

Concern about environmental crisis, however, was just part of the postwar environmental movement that Carson helped inaugurate and the 1970 Earth Day helped celebrate and consolidate. In that movement, utopian enthusiasm and optimistic reformism overshadowed environmental apocalypticism. People committed themselves to a wide variety of causes, such as "ecology," green lifestyles, ruralist back-to-the-land movements, and wilderness appreciation and protection: concern about environmental crisis in no way canceled out exuberance and hope. But neither did hope nullify concern about crisis; in fact, the two motives intensified each other. New perceptions of nature's potentially irreversible deformation intensified peoples' impulses to experience, protect, and cherish nature and work to ensure a viable future for human society.

Historians of the post-Carson environmental movements' political activism and cultural enthusiasms have concentrated, for the most part, on the hopeful or the hope-bringing side. As is only natural, commentaries on the environmental movement seek, while chronicling challenges and setbacks, to direct the movement toward solutions.<sup>3</sup> But just as important as telling the story of changing forms of activism is a second story: that of how environmental crisis and alarmed human concern about it has also

developed and substantially changed since the time of Rachel Carson. Though much has been (and is daily being) written about what constitutes environmental crisis, most of it is devoted to urgent present assessments and warnings. Little has been written that surveys how and why these assessments and warnings have changed over time. The result is that people tend to speak of *the* environmental crisis—as if “it” were a clear, stable, and ahistorical concept. To do so, however, is unfortunate, because it suppresses the complexity, diversity, and dynamism of accumulating environmental problems. It also obscures an equally important story: that of how the impact of these problems on U.S. society has changed—and dramatically deepened—over time.

The truth is that, since Rachel Carson, environmental crisis has rapidly evolved and substantially changed in form, not just in nature, but also in human discourse about it. Announcing itself as apocalypse, environmental crisis has been debunked, has resisted debunking, has been reworked, and has been dramatically diversified and expanded, resurfacing in unusual new forms. The world (as of the writing of this sentence and presumably also the reading of it) has not ended; eco-apocalypse hasn’t happened. Yet people today also accept the fact that they live in the shadow of environmental problems so severe that they constitute a crisis. And this shadow is in many ways far larger than the one Carson described. Carson’s small-town-American “silent spring” has become the much more diverse and comprehensive set of problems known, ominously, as the global environmental crisis. A history of crisis thought that fully incorporates both the apparent failure of previously forecasted apocalypses and the continuance and even deepening of alarm is a necessity today. This book seeks to fill that need.

Though far narrower in focus and findings than today’s sense of crisis, responses to proliferating environmental problems in the 1960s and 1970s were fiercely urgent and apocalyptically final. If the ecology movement had led people to a new kind of appreciation of nature, analyses of what threatened nature were clothed in fearful and sensational terms. Carson’s book started this trend off: it was anything but understated in its pictures of environmental catastrophe. Her book’s famous preface, “A Fable for Tomorrow,” depicts a “small town in the heart of America” which has been mysteriously “silenced.” This is a place from which birdsong and animal cry have been mysteriously erased; a place in which a mysterious blight has swept away the farm animals, killing chickens, cattle, and sheep and leaving the remaining ones virtually barren. What brings all this death is the pervasive poisoning of the environment with synthetic chemicals in a process Carson pictures as creepily silent: everywhere a “white granular powder” still lies on the land in patches, weeks after “it had fallen like snow upon the roofs and the lawns, the fields and the streams.”<sup>4</sup>

If a silenced spring and a poisoned earth thus became her trademark nightmares, Carson also did not shrink from bringing people into the loop. After describing the poisoning of ecosystems, Carson depicts human beings as exposed to conditions that go (as one chapter title puts it) “Beyond the Dreams of the Borgias.” For example, Carson makes the peacefully domestic suburban world of consumerist America—the society that emerged from the 1950s—seem a toxic minefield. A “few minutes’ research in any supermarket” yields, for Carson, abundant evidence of a new “birth-to-death contact with dangerous chemicals” for Americans. The insecticide section contains chemicals (in “homey and cheerful” packaging and displays) that, if dropped to the floor by child or careless adult, could splash people “with the same chemical that has sent sprayers using it into convulsions.”<sup>5</sup> Mothproofing material contains DDD (a close relative to DDT); insecticide contains chlordane. Carson then couples her gruesome rendering of domestic life with an equally up-setting and much more prolonged analysis of environmentally caused cancer. Her summary—a quotation from an unnamed “investigator”—is fearfully simple. People today live in “a sea of carcinogens.”<sup>6</sup>

Though never equaled by any subsequent nonfiction or fiction, *Silent Spring* helped spark a small tsunami of catastrophe rhetoric in environmental science and screeds and in popular literature. Thomas Disch introduced a collection of short fiction, *The Ruins of Earth*, by remarking that, while 1950s’ concerns about nuclear holocaust had been successfully black-boxed (“one had learned to live with the bombs largely by looking the other way”), environmental crisis was different: “now, in 1971, it isn’t possible to look the other way.”

It is the daytime, suburban side of existence that has become our nightmare. In effect the bombs are already dropping—as more carbon monoxide pollutes the air of Roseville [the suburb where Disch attended high school, but another instance of Carson’s “town in the heart of America”], as mercury poisons our waters, our fish, and ourselves, and as one by one our technology extinguishes the forms of life upon which our own life on this planet depends. These are not catastrophes of the imagination—these are what’s happening.<sup>7</sup>

Targeting other problems, Harry Harrison wrote “Roommates,” the story that became first his novel, *Make Room, Make Room!* and, later, the film *Soylent Green*. In the story, Andy Rusch, a policeman, dwells in a tiny apartment with his girlfriend, Shirl and a roommate, Sol; in this grotesquely overpopulated, environmentally and socially decayed New York City of the future, space is so short that everyone is forced to live packed together with people assigned to them by the Welfare Department. Heat is also at a premium; food is un nourishing and scarce (weedcrackers,

kofee, and, if you're lucky, soylent burgers), so that many Americans suffer from kwashiorkor, a deficiency disease. Even water is tightly rationed and fiercely fought over. But the deepest nightmare is population. Everywhere there are people, teeming, crowded together, fighting for breathing room, at each other's throats in a battle for dwelling space.

At the end of the film made from the novel made from this story, emphasis shifts from nausea at overpopulation to a keening lament for the extermination of nature and a horrible revelation about how the earth's population has come to feed itself. Andy, played by Charlton Heston, gazes in distress through the window of a chamber of the voluntary suicide center in which his beloved friend Sol, played by Edward G. Robinson, awaits death. The allure and consolation that bring people into the euthanasia center come from the chance to view old films of the planet's vanished natural loveliness, its last untainted fields, forests, flowers, and fauna.

Forcing his way into the center, Andy watches along with the dying Sol the gorgeous old footage. In this scene, all of Charlton Heston's memorable ability to portray pain and agony via dazzling white teeth, muscular jaws, and sweat-beaded forehead is displayed to advantage. For the last remnants of nature are preserved now only in technicolor virtual form on film; viewing them heightens immeasurably both their beauty and the pain of their loss. After this remarkable and influential scene—one that impacted subsequent crisis depiction strongly—the revelation that immediately follows, the unveiling of the movie's central dietetic mystery, is almost an anti-climax. The discovery that soylent green (the descendent of the story's tasty soylent burgers) is in fact the recycled flesh of the visitors to the euthanasia center is not quite the shocker it is supposed to be.

Philip Wylie's novel, *The End of the Dream*, expanded the field considerably. It does not just depict *an* environmental crisis; it chronicles an ongoing, prolifically diversified, multiform global environmental and social meltdown—a meltdown that becomes, the novel maintains, irreversible in 1971 (the year before the book's publication). 1971 is when “people switched off the grimly growing news about their endangered environs” and “an infantile majority became lunatic.”<sup>8</sup> Set in the mid-1990s, the novel depicts an earth ruined and human population decimated by an astonishing variety of environmental problems.

The novel's depiction of these problems has quite a lot of lively variety to it, ranging from the comic-grotesque to the spectacular. On the comicgrotesque side, additives in a brand of frozen TV dinners prove to have a fatal chemical flaw. They produce explosive gas when processed in the mammalian intestine. Victims are, first, the elderly Edith Greetlan's beloved dog Tumsie; when the dog makes the mistake of passing gas too close to an open flame, it explodes. Mrs. Greetlan herself explodes later

that night, as does, shortly thereafter, Father Trenchel, an Episcopalian minister who “one day... eased his flatulence by breaking wind as he was standing with his back to a blazing fire.”<sup>9</sup> When a fourth incident occurs—to a prize pig this time—the fact that the animal is so valuable instigates an investigation, and the dangerous food additive is quietly withdrawn from the shelves, without, of course, the real reasons for the recall being revealed.

More pathetic, though also grotesque, is a tragedy on the Little Dwain River in Kentucky. There parents are forced to watch their children die, thanks to release of boiling water from a supposedly safe upstream reactor. As their father remembers it:

They couldn't see to row back. Come on 'em too fast. We couldn't go out to them. Not even stay on the pier. They was screaming—bein' steamed to death, o'course. Cooked alive. Took ten minutes, maybe more, before they even began t' quieten down.<sup>10</sup>

Still more spectacular is the explosion of (not just the fire in) the Cuyahoga River outside Cleveland—“an explosion so cataclysmic it was attributed to an atomic bomb.”<sup>11</sup> What happens is that, frustrated by failed attempts actually to clean up this industrial sewer—labeled a “fire hazard” for its propensity to burn—industry and government instead develops an ingenious chemical film to cover it, sealing the pollution below. Thus the river is far more vigorously polluted than previously—and with supposedly no visible effects. The book also chronicles an attempt by industry to reengineer all rivers this way—as industrial sewers, thereby lessening the strain on the land. Problems occur only when an occasional great bubble of volatile toxins erupts through the film. Near Cleveland, as ill luck has it, a larger bubble, vastly more volatile than usual, forms and rises to the surface. It explodes, registering a force at “ground zero” of 21 kilotons.

The book's most dramatic event results from a still different environmental problem in New York. It comes at holiday time, when the city's merchants are hoping, after some bad years, for a record-breaking sales season. Ignoring reports that an extraordinary air pollution event was in progress, the mayor and his counselors decide to go ahead with their plan to put two thousand extra city buses on duty to ferry the anticipated huge crowds of shoppers in and out of Manhattan. People respond to the lure, even though breathing the air is painful: “every ensuing inhalation added misery...[and] people passing in their thousands were coughing, choking, eyes and noses streaming, handkerchiefs held to filter out some portion of the pollutants” (p.139). The novel's hero, Will Gulliver, encounters the resulting meltdown head on. Leaving his workplace, he looks downtown through the dim haze—visibility is less than a block—as

he hears an odd sound, something like “a whispered scream” that in seconds becomes “a roar.”

What I saw was almost incredible. The crowd on my side of the street at a distance of four blocks and beyond had become dwarfed. It took a moment to understand that incredible phenomenon. It was as if everybody had suddenly become two feet tall. And this strange endwarfing was spreading. The standing masses were serially shortening—and then it was plain.

They had fallen.

They were falling like wheat cut by an invisible reaper, one that was approaching. They were, I knew, dead.<sup>12</sup>

Unable to get back into his office building, Will turns to run with the mob uptown, realizing that what has happened is the generation of “a lethal concentration of nitrogen oxides, NO and NO<sub>2</sub>, mainly” and that it will reach the spot where he stands in a minute or less. As he flees, “the voice from the south was now terrible, a roar and scream of fear from thousands of throats.”<sup>13</sup> Gulliver makes it to Central Park, then back to his Park Avenue apartment; he is one of the lucky ones, as huge numbers of shoppers and rescuers lie dead in cross streets, at the wheels of their cars, fire trucks, or ambulances. The city smells “like a battlefield”; over a million two hundred thousand people die.<sup>14</sup>

Doubtless, to most, imagery of such extreme ecological and social meltdown would seem out of date today. Some might consider these garish images with the indulgent amusement that outlandish fashions of several decades ago can inspire, the amusement that later generations feel at recalling the strange old worlds that people somehow once so naively lived in. Though the imagination of disaster very much persists, old disasters quickly age. Others might come to a still harsher judgment. They might well conclude that the apocalyptically minded called nature to its last party, and no guests came. Indeed, recounting the sometimes hysterical warnings that didn’t come true, skeptics have argued with some influence that the problem was not with the environment but with those who raised the warning—the victims of what was called (among other things) the Chicken Little syndrome.

Still, despite all the debunking of past warnings, concern about environmental crisis persists. Indeed, the stories that fill the newspapers today are, in some ways, more disturbing than anything Wylie imagined. Open water at the North Pole; state-sized chunks of ice shearing off Antarctic glaciers; four million acres of Alaskan forest dead as a probable result of climate change, causing underwriters to refuse fire insurance coverage to nearby residents; acute water shortages predicted for an increasing number of people in the world during the new century—stories

like these make contemporary environmental problems seem graver and more soberingly real than anything in Wylie's fiction. The earth seems stressed past its limits, and human futures seem increasingly constricted and constrained; concern with crisis has not simply disappeared into the background like smoke from a fanatic's gradually expiring campfire.

As I shall argue in this book, just the opposite has happened. The smoke has grown more persistent and omnipresent even as a well-organized ideological fire brigade has sought to smother its plumes while ignoring the fire producing them. For even as it has been effectively contested and denied, a sense of unresolved, perhaps unresolvable, environmental crisis has become part of people's normality today. Faith in effective action has diminished at the same time that the concern about the gravity of the crisis has sharpened. Debate about environmental crisis has suffused itself more widely than before throughout American culture and society and become entangled in the routines of more and more daily social and cultural controversies. No longer an apocalypse ahead, critical environmental problems and constraints help construct society's sense of daily normality. Far from going away, environmental crisis has become a regular part of the uncertainty in which people nowadays dwell.

In taking readers through the story of how crisis has been formulated and denied yet has deepened, diversified, and domesticated itself as a part of ordinary life, I hope this book will do for them what it did for me in writing it. I hope that the book will make readers feel that, though looking environmental crisis seriously in the face may risk turning one to stone, regarding crisis in a serious and sustained fashion is as important to the maturation of American society as capturing Medusa's head was to Perseus' maturation personally. He *needed* that head to attain his adulthood. So does American society today: facing and understanding how and why people are so rapidly changing their terran environment is fundamental to any credible and mature understanding both of society and culture today and of the legacy it is leaving future generations. And perhaps such understanding is more possible to reach today than it was during the 1970s, when a direct, eye-to-eye encounter with crisis in its most apocalyptic form was vigorously pursued. Looking more slowly at environmental crisis in the mirrors of politics, science, history, sociology, philosophy, and literature may help preserve us, as Perseus' shield did him, from turning to stone, from being frozen either politically or psychologically, by what we contemplate.

But taking environmental crisis seriously in this way is, of course, not easy. And people, collectively, have decades of uneasy denial and worsened conditions to overcome. Accordingly, regarding crisis in these mirrors will initially, at least, be difficult. Indeed, many may come to feel that society today resembles less the young and ardent Perseus contemplating Medusa than it does the faux-youthful hero of Oscar Wilde's famous fable, *The*

*Portrait of Dorian Gray*, standing in front of a picture of himself, the curtains that had been concealing it pulled temporarily aside. For U.S. society today, like Dorian Gray, does not seem overtly to exhibit the stigmata of a life led so wrongly. Only an artful portrait of it shows how far the process has gone. Apparently healthy but no longer innocent and perhaps fairly far advanced toward exhibiting openly what the picture shows, contemporary viewers may well feel how difficult it is to look closely at such an image without closing the curtain quickly and trying to walk away.

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