



MAX FRISCH

Man in the Holocene

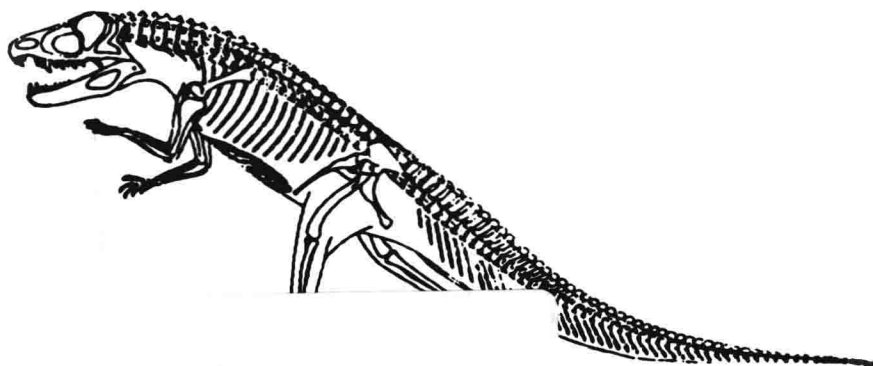
"A masterpiece."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

A HARVEST BOOK

MAX FRISCH

Man in the Holocene



Harcourt Brace & Company
San Diego New York London

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and Geoffrey Skelton

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6277 Sea Harbor Drive,
Orlando, Florida 32887-6777.

This work originally appeared in *The New Yorker*.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Frisch, Max, 1911—

[Mensch erscheint im Holozän. English]

Man in the Holocene: a story/Max Frisch; translated from the
German by Geoffrey Skelton.

p. cm.—(A Harvest book)

"A Helen and Kurt Wolff book."

ISBN 0-15-656952-3

I. Title.

PT2611.R814M4413 1994

833'.912—dc20 94-4523

Printed in the United States of America
First Harvest edition 1981

K J I H G F

Man in the Holocene

Other Novels by Max Frisch

BLUEBEARD

GANTENBEIN

HOMO FABER

I'M NOT STILLER

MONTAUK

A Story

Translated from the German by Geoffrey Skelton

A Harvest Book
A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book

Man in the Holocene

It should be possible to build a pagoda of crispbread, to think of nothing, to hear no thunder, no rain, no splashing from the gutter, no gurgling around the house. Perhaps no pagoda will emerge, but the night will pass.

Somewhere a tapping on metal.

It is always with the fourth floor that the wobbling begins; a trembling hand as the next piece of crispbread is put in place, a cough when the gable is already standing, and the whole thing lies in ruins—

Geiser has time to spare.

The news in the village is conflicting; some people say there has been no landslide at all, others that an old supporting wall has collapsed, and there is no way of diverting the highway at that spot. The woman in the post office, who ought to know, merely confirms that the mail bus is not running, but she stands behind the little counter in her usual care-laden fashion, keeping usual office hours, selling stamps, and even accepting parcels, which she places unhurriedly on the scales and then franks. It is taken for granted that state and canton are doing everything in their power to get the highway back in order. If

necessary, helicopters can be brought in, unless there is fog. Nobody in the village thinks that the day, or perhaps the night, will come when the whole mountain could begin to slide, burying the village for all time.

Somewhere a tapping on metal.

It is midnight, but still no pagoda.

It started on the Thursday of the previous week, when it was still possible to sit out in the open; the weather was sultry, as always before a thunderstorm, the gnats biting through one's socks; no summer lightning, it just felt uncomfortable. Not a bird in the grounds. His guests, a youngish couple on their way to Italy, suddenly decided to leave, though they could have spent the night in his house. It was not actually cloudy—just a yellowish haze, such as one sees in the Arabian desert before a sandstorm; no wind. Faces also looking yellowish. His guests did not even empty their glasses, they were suddenly in such a hurry to be off, though there were no sounds of thunder. Not a drop of rain, either. But on the following morning it was drumming on the windowpanes, hissing through the leaves of the chestnut tree.

Since then, not a night without thunderstorms and cloudbursts.

From time to time the power is cut, something one is used to in this valley; hardly has there been time to find a candle, and then at last some matches, when the power is restored, lights in the house, though the thunder continues.

It is not so much the bad weather—

The twelve-volume encyclopedia DER GROSSE BROCKHAUS explains what causes lightning and distinguishes streak lightning, ball lightning, bead lightning, etc., but there is little to be learned about thunder; yet in the course of a single night, unable to sleep, one can distinguish at least nine types of thunder:

1.

The simple thunder crack.

2.

Stuttering or tottering thunder: this usually comes after a lengthy silence, spreads across the whole valley, and can go on for minutes on end.

3.

Echo thunder: shrill as a hammer striking on loose metal and setting up a whirring, fluttering echo which is louder than the peal itself.

4.

Roll or bump thunder: relatively unfrightening, for it is reminiscent of rolling barrels bumping against one another.

5.

Drum thunder.

6.

Hissing or gravel thunder: this begins with a hiss, like a truck tipping a load of wet gravel, and ends with a thud.

7.

Bowling-pin thunder: like a bowling pin that, struck by the rolling ball, cannons into the other pins and knocks them all down; this causes a confused echo throughout the valley.

8.

Hesitant or tittering thunder (no flash of lightning through the windows): this indicates that the storm is retreating over the mountains.

9.

Blast thunder (immediately following a flash of lightning through the windows): this is not like two hard masses colliding; on the contrary, it is like a single huge mass being blasted apart and falling to either side, breaking into countless pieces; in its wake, rain comes pouring down.

At intervals the power goes off again.

What would be bad would be losing one's memory—

An example of something Geiser has not forgotten: the Pythagorean theorem. For that he does not need to drag out the encyclopedia. On the other hand, he cannot remember how to draw the golden section (A is to B as $A + B$ to A ; that he does still know) with compasses and set square. He knew once, of course—

No knowledge without memory.

Today is Tuesday.

Still no horns sounding in the valley.

Field glasses are no use at all in times like these, one screws them this way and that without being able to find any sharp outline to bring into focus; all they do is make the mist thicker. What can be seen with the naked eye: the gutter on the roof, the nearest pine tree in the grounds, two wires disappearing into the mist, raindrops gliding slowly down the wires. If one takes an umbrella and trudges through the grounds on a tour of inspection despite wet and mist, one can no longer see one's own house after only a hundred paces, just brambles in mist, rivulets, bracken in mist. A little wall in the lower garden (dry-stone) has collapsed: debris among the lettuces, lumps of clay under the tomatoes. Perhaps that happened days ago.

Still, one can get tomatoes in cans.

Lavender flowering in the mist: scentless, as in a color film. One wonders what bees do in a summer like this.

There are provisions enough in the house:

three eggs
bouillon cubes
tea
vinegar and olive oil
flour
onions
a jar of pickled gherkins
Parmesan cheese
sardines, one can

spices of all kinds
crispbread, five packages
garlic
raspberry syrup for the grandchildren
anchovies
bay leaves
semolina
salted almonds
spaghetti, one package
olives
Ovomaltine
one lemon
meat in the icebox

Later in the day there is more thunder; and shortly afterward, hail. The white stones, some of them the size of hazelnuts, dance on the granite table; in a few minutes the lawn is a white sheet, all Geiser can do is stand at the window and watch the vine being torn to shreds, the roses, too—

There is nothing to do but read.

(Novels are no use at all on days like these, they deal with people and their relationships, with themselves and others, fathers and mothers and daughters or sons, lovers, etc., with individual souls, usually unhappy ones, with society, etc., as if the place for these things were assured, the earth for all time earth, the sea level fixed for all time.)

No horns sounding in the valley.

Obviously the highway is still blocked.

When, occasionally, the rain eases up—it does not stop entirely, but becomes lighter, so that one no longer hears it on the roof, rain just seen as a noiseless shading over the darkness of the nearest pine tree—the silence is still not complete; on the contrary, one then begins to hear the rushing of water down in the valley; there must be streams everywhere, streams that normally do not exist. A constant rushing sound throughout the valley.

The Creation of the World

(Job 38; Ps. 33:6-9; Ps. 104; Prov. 8:22-31)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

2 And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

Geiser wonders whether there would still be a God if there were no longer a human brain, which cannot accept the idea of a creation without a creator.

Today is Wednesday.

(Or Thursday?)

One can hardly call it a library that Geiser has at his disposal during these days in which gardening is impossible;

Elsbeth read novels mainly, the classics and others, Geiser himself preferring factual books (BRIGHTER THAN A THOUSAND SUNS); the diary of Captain Scott, who froze to death at the South Pole—Geiser has read this several times, but it is a very long while since he last read the Bible. Besides the twelve-volume encyclopedia there are: gardening books, a book on snakes, a history of the canton of Ticino, the Swiss encyclopedia, as well as picture books for the grandchildren (THE WORLD WE LIVE IN), the Duden dictionary of foreign words, and a book about Iceland, which Geiser once visited thirty years ago, as well as maps and rambling guides that provide information about the geology, climate, history, etc., of the district.

CHAPTER I

Ticino in Prehistoric Times The First Inhabitants

In the far-distant epochs of geological antiquity, the present canton of Ticino, like all else, lay for long periods submerged beneath the deep sea extending between two age-old continents to the north and the south. Massive layers of sedimentary rock were formed in that ocean, and these piled up on the crystal rocks of the ocean bed.

As sections of the earth's crust emerged above sea level, the natural forces of weathering and erosion at once began their work of shaping and displacing. Frost and wind produced ridges and peaks on the raised masses of rock, while water and glaciers ate into the furrows and carved out the first valleys. This was no continuous process: it was spread over various periods, widely separated in time. This we can discern without difficulty from the many terraces running parallel to one another along the valley slopes, each of which must once have formed the valley bed.

In the main valleys the force of the glaciers was far greater

than in the subsidiary valleys, and the rivers are in consequence deeper than their tributaries. For this reason the beds of the subsidiary valleys have remained higher than those of the main valleys, and the tributaries flow over sheer ledges into the main rivers. This explains the many waterfalls, which give the Ticino valley its wild and romantic appearance.

On the other hand, we know more about the people who came to live in this district during the *Iron Age* (c.800–58 B.C.). The discovery of graves from the earliest Ice Age,⁴ the so-called *Ligurian period*, on the one hand; and place and field names⁵ on the other, show that the Ticino district at that time was inhabited by the *Ligures*. History tells us that in earliest antiquity the *Ligures* made settlements, not only in present-day Liguria, but also in the valleys of the Western Alps, to which the territory of present-day Ticino belongs.

Finally, mention must be made of the many rockfalls that have occurred since the retreat of the glaciers, for they played no little part in giving many districts in the canton of Ticino the appearance they have today.

According to legend, one of Hercules's tasks was to lead a tribe of people across the Alps into Spain and then into Africa. On the march through the deep snow of the Alpine passes, a rear guard was left behind. Many soldiers froze to death, and the survivors were unable to re-establish contact with the main column, which had gone on ahead. They made no further attempt to advance, but settled down in Alpine lands. The word "*Lepontine*" means "those who stayed behind." That these *Lepontines*, whose name has in fact been applied in the course of time to a large number of other tribes, did populate both slopes of the Gotthard—this we know from completely reliable sources, such as the Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23–79) and Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.).

It is not true, incidentally, that no horns are sounding in the valley; it is just that the mail bus is not running, one misses its three-note horn, and the noisy trucks that usually carry the slabs and blocks of granite down into the valley