

A War Between Natural and Unnatural Life: A Reflection on *Children of Time*

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POSC-262: The Affective Interface

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September 18, 2021

Your first assignment is to read 1 of the 2 science fiction novels listed below and then write a 3-page reflection about one or two examples from the novel of how accelerated speciation messes with clichés about what means life.

In debates concerning genetic modification, there exist two main parties: the boundary pushers and the conservative thinkers. While the former is optimistic about technology, the latter is wary about human beings “playing God.” During debates, the “*Should we?*” question captures imagination. Thus, an assumption escapes notice, namely, that “natural” life is the status quo. Though it may continually drip blood and expose wounds, leading predator to feast on prey, the status quo is assumed to be the best functioning version of Earth. Conversely, “unnatural” life is assumed to be destructive to the planet and its inhabitants. However, what happens to the debates if these assumptions are questioned? By using accelerated speciation in *Children of Time*, Tchaikovsky shows how “natural” life, represented by humanity, allows the weaknesses of the status quo to remain and how “unnatural” life, represented by the spiders of the *Portia labiata* species, may help society prosper by rooting out evils previously deemed innate or unremovable.

In the novel, humanity remains “natural,” thus keeping a weakness of the status quo: the prioritization of manifest destiny. When the race to colonize other planets met backlash, neither the boundary pushers nor the conservative thinkers relented; humanity destroyed itself in the Old Empire, bombing Earth until there was no inhabitable area left. Several generations later, a group of survivors sleep in suspension chambers aboard the spaceship Gilgamesh, waiting for the day that they land on their new home. One, named Holsten, is a classicist who studies the Old Empire. He thinks of ancient humanity as a different species entirely. They weren’t human, but “monsters: clumsy, bickering, short-sighted monsters” who conversed in strange languages and developed strange technology still beyond the reach of his understanding.¹ However, as different as they are to the survivors, the similarities are striking because nothing has disrupted the status quo. The all-consuming desire to “play God” still leaves little room for empathy.

Though the Old Empire collapsed eons ago and society now consists of hibernating humans, the same status quo reigns. On a separate spaceship, a scientist named Avrana Kern has successfully engineered a nanovirus that will accelerate the speciation of monkeys on an unoccupied planet. However, before her dream to become God comes to fruition, a mutiny arises. Kern cannot reconcile or even empathize with the conservative thinker, whom she likens to a “[terrorist]” and “spoiled [child]” who loathes sharing the “sole attention of the universe.”² As a result, the spaceship is destroyed, the monkeys perish, and the nanovirus reaches the *Portia*

¹ Adrian Tchaikovsky, *Children of Time* (London: Orbit, 2018), 276.

² Tchaikovsky, 9

labiata spiders on the planet. Kern is the only traveler to escape. Over the course of the novel, Gilgamesh repeatedly approaches Kern, asking to settle on the “green planet” only to be met with violence.³ “This is my world,” she says, “I will brook no interference with my experiment.”⁴ The scientist is on a solitary path towards manifest destiny, and thus lacks the emotional bandwidth to relate to her brethren and to understand their desperation in finding a new home.

This weakness of the status quo, a lack of empathy, pervades the novel. Once it is revealed that a group of survivors will act as the sacrificial lamb by cultivating a freezing, harsh moon “without an atmosphere” for the rest, Gilgamesh experiences its own mutiny.⁵ The moon colonists demand to be freed of their unwanted role, but the ship’s unrelenting commander is possessed by the desire to “say he’s claimed this system for Earth.”⁶ With neither side willing to concede, the mutineers leave on a shuttle headed for Kern’s planet. Their hope for a welcoming presence and a new home is immediately dashed. Kern rejects them, preoccupied with a single-minded thought: “They want to take away my world.”⁷ Just as Gilgamesh’s commander values claiming his own planet above the wishes of other humans, so does Kern. The planet is not the “green planet.” Rather, it is “Kern’s World.” Without any event to disrupt the status quo, humanity once again forsakes empathy on the quest for manifest destiny. “Natural” life has nearly been extinguished by its own hand, and is on the verge of extinction once again.

On the other hand, “unnatural” life targets the weaknesses of the *Portia labiata* spiders’ status quo--cannibalistic tendencies and the elevation of females over males. Due to the nano-virus, the spiders’ genes “mutate in useful ways” and the species undergoes accelerated speciation.⁸ Female spiders increasingly see male spiders as equals, not lesser mates to be eaten. This evolution is seen as *good* societal development by Portia, who says, “It is a mark of how far her species has come.”⁹ They are no longer the beasts of generations past, who spent their days “hunting Spitters in the wilderness, or falling prey to the jaws of ants.”¹⁰ Instead, they have built societies and created different cultures; even the clashes between the cities of Great Nest and Seven Trees highlight the higher level of thinking that they now possess. Conservative thinkers

³ Tchaikovsky, 45

⁴ Tchaikovsky, 95

⁵ Tchaikovsky, 128

⁶ Tchaikovsky, 144

⁷ Tchaikovsky, 173

⁸ Tchaikovsky, 8

⁹ Tchaikovsky, 154

¹⁰ Tchaikovsky, 361-362

may see such shifts as “weird and strange,” as Kern does.¹¹ However, they can no longer argue that “unnatural” life is destructive. The nanovirus challenges the “weight of society,” pushing it to become more inclusive and, thus, sustainable.¹² In adopting a new status quo, the spiders “have made a virtue of the unnatural.”¹³ Unlike “natural” life, “unnatural” life has safeguarded the existence of the species.

In the finale of *Children of Time*, Tchaikovsky directly compares and contrasts the results of “natural” and “unnatural” life. Without anything to move humanity away from its status quo, it remains on the path of manifest destiny. The humans on Gilgamesh are still “clumsy, bickering, short-sighted monsters,” unable to see a future in which they and the spiders live in harmony. On the other hand, the spiders have evolved. Aided by the nanovirus, they can imagine a society built on cooperation and trust. When Gilgamesh advances towards the planet, the humans bomb it, fully intending to “burn [the spiders] out” of their home.¹⁴ As Kern is “only human,” she wishes to return the fire. However, she can only “[watch], omnipresent, as her children prepare” not to kill the humans, but to infect them with the nanovirus.¹⁵ When the humans awaken on the planet, surrounded by spiders, they are not startled, nor do they rush to their guns. Instead, the virus soothes them, rewiring their brains to see the spiders as kin.¹⁶ Ultimately, when “natural” and “unnatural” life meet, the latter outsmarts and out-empathizes the former. It ensures the survival of both species on their new home planet.

Ethical debates about the progress of technology seldom focus on the inherent assumptions about life. “Natural” life remains the well-functioning status quo, and “unnatural” life, strange and destructive. Tchaikovsky challenges these ideas by examining a humanity stuck in the weaknesses of generations past and spiders undergoing accelerated speciation. He suggests a world in which it is the “unnatural” life that survives, and the “natural” that nearly destroys itself and its planet twice. Therefore, *Children of Time* provides a critical lesson: it is important to examine and question one’s assumptions. Otherwise, opponents dig deeper into their beliefs, too captivated by ethics to spare a glance at the assumptions that could end their perpetual debate.

¹¹ Tchaikovsky, 454

¹² Tchaikovsky, 361

¹³ Tchaikovsky, 362

¹⁴ Tchaikovsky, 544

¹⁵ Tchaikovsky, 589-590

¹⁶ Tchaikovsky, 593

Bibliography

Tchaikovsky, Adrian. *Children of Time*. London: Orbit, 2018.