'I Close the Mima':

The Role Of Narrative in Harry Martinson's *Aniara*

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Abstract

In 1956, Swedish writer and Nobel Laureate Harry Martinson published an epic science fiction poem, *Aniara*, about a spaceship thrown off course and dooming its passengers to an eternity of deep space travel. Aboard was also the Mima, an artificial intelligence that eventually committed suicide out of despair. The Mima is generally perceived to be a mimetic construct, but this article also interprets her in the form of a personified narrative: when the Mima dies, both the community aboard the *Aniara*, and the structure of the poem itself, breaks down into individualised constituents.

Keywords

Introduction

In 1956, the Swedish writer Harry Martinson (1904-1978) published an epic science fiction poem of 103 cantos, *Aniara: An Revy om Människan i Tid och Rum* (*Aniara: A Review of Man in Time and Space*[1]) which follows the journey of the titular spaceship deep into the universe. Burdened with thousands of passengers, the Aniara also contains the Mima: an artificial intelligence who eventually kills herself out of an existential despair that will later infect the shipboard population and leave no survivors.

This despair comes from two sources. The first is the reaction of the ship's passengers to the immensity of space, and the second comes from their witnessing an atomic bomb destroy a city that was once home to many of them. It is how this witnessing affects the Mima, however, and how the Mima's death affects both the events within the poem and the form of the poem itself, that is the topic of this article. These effects have been interpreted variously, as will be described below, but what has not been observed is the consequence of the Mima's despair on *narrative*. In writing an epic poem Martinson has clearly used narrative as an important tool, but the subtleties of that narrative – especially as it relates to the Mima – make an interesting study. Both in *Aniara* and on Aniara, narrative is key.

This article will first trace the basic narrative of the story up until the death of the Mima. Previous interpretations of the Mima in the relevant literature will be explored, as these lay a basis for the primary assertion of this article: that the Mima is not only a mimetic form, capable of conscience and reflection. She is also narrative personified, and the narrative of the poem breaks down after the event of her death.

Aniara, Science Fiction, and Artificial Intelligence

The travellers of the Aniara are headed away from Earth, away from the ecological destruction that has been wrought there. 'Jorden nått därhän / att hon för strålförgiftnings skull beredes / en tid av vila, ro och karantän' (6) ('Earth must have a rest / for all her poisons, launch her refugees / out into space, and keep her quarantine') (1). Yet the poem has barely begun when 'En nödgir för asteroiden Hondo / (som härmed räknas upptäckt) tog oss ut ur kursen' (11) ('a swerve to avoid

the asteroid / Hondo') (3) irretrievably sends the spaceship off route. The passengers are stranded in emptiness. They cannot turn the ship around, or do anything but endure as the Aniara heads inexorably towards Lyra, the constellation of poets. The ship remains habitable, with much of the instrumentation still intact, but an endless journey lies before the passengers and no communication is possible outside the ship: 'I ångest sänt av oss i Aniara / föll och förföll vårt anrop Aniara' (13) ('our hailing signal just echoed and re-echoed / Aniara... Aniara...') (5).

Reactions to this doom of eternal wandering are mixed, but at the centre of the community formed on the spaceship is the artificial intelligence known as the Mima – indeed, the poem is narrated by a character called the Mimarobe, who is primarily responsible for looking after the Mima. The name 'Mima' is in itself something of an etymological puzzle. The glossary at the end of (the MacDiarmid and Schubert edition of) the poem states that it comes 'From the Greek *mimos*, an imitator or reproducer, and *mimesis*, imitation, art, especially acting' (1963b: 131). Stensson points out an alternate interpretation (2006: 158): the 'Sanskrit word *mimamsa* means something like second thought or careful reflection'.

This imitation of life by an artificial intelligence is something that is a frequent theme in science fiction. The narrative struggle for a machine to surpass imitation and, like Pinocchio, achieve the status of that which it imitates is frequent, and can be observed in films such as *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), wherein an android child goes on a quest to find the Blue Fairy and be transformed into a 'real boy'.

These interactions between human and imitator can cause substantial conflict. One of the most famous examples of artificial intelligences in science fiction is HAL, from Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). HAL entrenched itself within the narrative as primary antagonist yet, as Landon remarks, 'HAL is a much more interesting character in 2001 than Dave Bowman, and ... HAL's 'death' is much more affective than are those of *Discovery*'s human crew' (Landon 1993: 198). Similarly, Picard called HAL 'the most emotional character in the film' (2001) even if that emotion was merely apparent, and Stoehr considers that HAL 'seems more human and empathetic'

(2008: 125) than the human astronauts. So strong was this impression, in fact, that in the sequel *2010*, HAL was rehabilitated to hero status, cementing its place as the star of the original.

Created by humans as a tool (usually for economic or scientific benefit), the artificial intelligences of science fiction are often defined by their ability to mimic human behaviour, though this mimicry has varying levels of success. Clearly an artificial intelligence in android form comes closer to 'passing' for human than a more traditionally rendered computer form such as HAL or the Mima, but it is in the patterns of thought, or the achievement of emotion, that gives that artificiality its truly human characteristics. Part of this is intrinsic, a function of programming – an intelligence programmed by humans, designed to mimic human behaviour, is hardly going to start mimicking a rhinoceros instead. But part comes from the ability of the artificial intelligence to exhibit learning behaviour, to exceed the logical patterns of its programming. Whether or not the Mima makes this progression is a central question of the *Aniara* text.

A form of computer and transmitter both, the Mima searches for other life and shows on giant screens the results of her search, much of which is centred around the homes the passengers have left behind. 'Det kommer spar och bilder, landskap och fragment av språk / som talas någonstans, men var' (16) ('Pictures appear, / fragments of landscapes and we catch / snatches of language spoken somewhere') (6). In this way, the Mima acts as a sort of Oracle that 'ljuger inte. / Och det förstår de flesta, att en mima / kan inte mutas, den är omutbar' (17) - ('is incorruptible and cannot lie') (7) and tells the story of the universe around them.

Note that this incorruptibility indicates an initial status of failed or limited mimicry. The Mima *cannot* lie. It is not in her programming, and she hasn't progressed to the point where lying is a potential option. (In this she is a precursor of the android child David in *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, who according to Hoberman (2007: 79) is 'a perfect reproach to humanity, hard-wired for innocence'.) The passengers aboard the Aniara begin to treat this innocent, oracular source with an almost religious fervour. This is a somewhat understandable reaction, as the Mima is not only a link to the life they left behind, but the

last intelligence capable of providing an active link to that life. Geraci comments that 'science fiction blurs the line between technology (particularly AI technology) and the divine by according robots and computer AIs with the characteristics of the Holy' (2010: 49), and the Mima's far-seeing, near omnipotent ability to transmit visions of another place encourages this perception amongst the passengers. An interesting contrast here is the 'all-seeing red eye' (2000: 110) of HAL, which Wheat compares to the eye of God. Both machines take on religious connotations, but the reception of their metaphorically divine properties is entirely different, according to the reactions of their human companions.

The Mimarobe observes the worship of the Mima, saying that 'Som vid ett altare de slå sig neder / var gång jag kommer in och startar miman' (17) ('every time I start the Mima / they prostrate themselves as before an altar') (7). He watches as 'en sekt till mimadyrkan slår sig neder / och smeker mimans postament och beder / den ädla miman' (18) ('members of a special cult gather / to caress her, stroke her pedestal, / beg from her, the noble Mima') (8). The Mimarobe is less inclined than the others to worship. Knowing that the Mima is a machine – the Mimarobe is after all the primary caretaker, who looks after the Mima and switches it on and off – the Mimarobe still clings to the technological achievements the Mima represents.

There is an interesting tension in the text as the reader wonders just how capable the Mima is of emotion. Factual knowledge can be learned or programmed, but it is possible to interpret the Mima as a soul, which has connotations of sensibility at least. Nonetheless, as the first instances of worship are being described, the narrator comments that 'Så är det väl att miman inget känner, / att högmod inte bor i mimans inre' (16) ('It's well the Mima has no feelings / and no vanity built into her') (7). Yet later on the Mima has feelings enough to despair and succumb to what is essentially suicide.

During the voyage, the destruction of the city of Dourisburg is transmitted by the Mima onto the screens of the Aniara. Dourisburg is destroyed by war, and the passengers witness the moment 'när själen söndersprängdes, / när kroppen söndersslängdes / när en kvadratmil stadsmark vrängde' (52) ('when souls were torn apart / and bodies

hurled away / as six square miles of townland twisted') (29). The Mima does not edit or otherwise try to hide the horror of what is happening back on Earth: 'Men miman visar allt, omutligt klar / till sista bilden tar den brand och död' (53) (she 'shows it all, uncompromising, / transmits to the last picture, fire and slaughter') (30). In this she betrays her machine origins as an independent observer who is emotionally unattached to what she is transmitting. This is in stark contrast to the actions of the Mimarobe, who tries desperately to stop the nightmare unrolling: 'Till miman rusar jag som om jag kunde / det hemska dådet hejda med nin nöd' (53) ('I dash towards the Mima as tho' I might / arrest the frightful action with my anguish') (30). Yet if the Mima acts independently, she is also deeply affected by what she has seen: 'Hon hade sett granitens vita gråt / när sten och malm förgasas till ett dis. / Hon hade rörts av dessa stenars kval' (58) ('hot white tears of granite / where stones and ores are vaporized, / it wrung her heart to hear these stones lament') (33).

The Mima's Suicide

Seven days after the destruction of Dourisburg, the Mima calls her Mimarobe to her. She gives him what is, in effect, her last will and testament.

Förmörkad i sett cellverk av den hardhat
som människan visar i sin ondskas tid
kom hon som länge väntat var därhän
att hon på mimors sätt till slut bröts ner.
Indifferenta tredje vebens tacis
ser tusen ting som inget öga ser.
Nu ville hon i tingets namn ha frid.
Nu ville hon ej förevisa mer. (58)

(Her cell-works dimmed and damaged by the cruelty
which in his evil only man can show,
she came, as might be expected, to the point
where she at last, as even Mimas must, broke down.

> The indifferent third veben's tacis
> sees a thousand things no human eye can see.
> Now, in the name of these, the Mima
> craved for surcease. She will not speak again.) (33).

For seven days the Mima struggles with Dourisburg, before she ends her own life – before her day of ultimate rest. For seven days she gives herself over to careful thoughts and reflections, in what Stensson might recognise as *mimamsa*. The second thoughts resulting from this act of witnessing destruction, end in the Mima's voluntary resignation of her role aboard the Aniara. This inversion of the Christian creative mythology – six days of destruction before a final end – can be read in a number of ways. These ways, however, fall back onto the ability of the Mima to *feel*.

It is possible that, as a mimetic construct, the Mima came to the Aniara as a blank, unfeeling slate and learned by imitation to reproduce the emotional lives of those around her. Given the glossary definition of *mimesis*, however ('especially acting', Martinson 1963b: 131) one has to wonder if the Mima truly felt despair or merely a proximate facsimile of it. Given that it drove her to suicide, it is arguable that she, at least, considered her feelings legitimate whether they were mimetic or not.

It is also possible that the Mima's ability to see what 'no human eye can see' gives her a perspective that only makes her *appear* unfeeling – and she exists in a world where emotional appearance is a cultural construct. She can't weep, for instance, or exhibit the physical characteristics associated with human sorrow. Furthermore, compared to the human passengers aboard the spaceship, the Mima is functionally immortal. Her lifespan far outlasts those of the people who tend to her. While those people will never reach the constellation of Lyra – the journey is simply too long – it is possible that the Mima could have done so. A creature of science herself, a technological creation, the Mima's arrival at Lyra would have been the perfect, transcendent union of poetry and science. She can, as it were, afford to take the long view.

This 'long view' is supplemented by her superior witnessing skills.

She is capable, perhaps, of witnessing things that human optics cannot perceive – different spectra of light, for instance, and, more metaphorically, her enhanced perspective means she sees with equal weight the destruction of Dourisburg and the destruction of its inhabitants. While it is natural for the passengers to focus more on the loss of life, to care more for the city and its population than the stones that city was built on, the Mima, as an independent, non-human entity, has no such prejudice. The lamenting stones affect her as deeply, if not more than, the loss of human life.

The passengers aboard the Aniara might weep for the loss of their homes, the physical structures they left behind, but there is not the same level of what might be called inorganic identification – compassion for the non-living, non-human environment. But then the Mima is made of inorganic compounds herself. She is not a biological organism, and her connection to humanity is limited by the strength of her mimetic capacity. When this is imperfect, the Mima presents, intellectually and emotionally, as inhuman.

It is this very inhumanity that sometimes makes her blind to the needs of those around her. When the passengers of Aniara are at first beginning to adjust to their long exile, the Mima is a point of consolation. She shows them other worlds, shows them new and distracting visions that ameliorate their emotional and spiritual crises.

> alla går till miman.
> Och för en tid kan miman lösa trycket
> och skingra minnena från Doris stränder.
> Ty ofta kan den värld som Mima visar
> slå ut den värld vi minns och som vi lämnat. (20)

> (All throng
> to our Mima and for a short time
> our Mima can ease the pressure of despair,
> dispel the memories of life on Douris,
> for the world Mima shows glimpses of
> can often take the place of the world
> we remember but have left forever.) (9)

Yet the Mima, while well-meaning, cannot see well enough, cannot empathise well enough, with the perspectives of her passengers. Her mimetic nature has taught her that empathy is a good, but not how to effectively express it. That level of socialised behaviour is beyond her, and because of it her attempts at comfort are not always successful. An example of this type of failure occurs when she unwittingly hurts a navigator that comes to her for consolation. 'Den är till för tröten / men inte för att mänskorna ska rysa / för världar som syns lika den de lämnat' (44) ('She is meant to comfort / and not to tantalize her human watchers / with glimpses of worlds like that they've left') (25). This fundamental disconnection would also explain why the Mima is not affected by the near-worship of the passengers. It is not, as the Mimarobe says, that she does not feel in general. It is that, from her enormous perspective, the *particular* feeling of the religious devotion of the passengers is not understandable to her. That the Mima's perspective exists does not limit her mimetic abilities – she is still able to mimic, or possibly even truly learn, while never having been emotionless. And crucially, without emotions, the Mima's breakdown could not occur.

Stensson interprets the Mima's breakdown as a function of 'extreme trauma' (2006: 159). This trauma is not physical in nature – rather it results almost inevitably from close confinement with human beings. He states that 'What is traumatic is that there is no protection from mankind' (ibid.). The total destruction of Dourisburg, the destruction that is primarily witnessed and transmitted by the Mima, is the final straw – 'And the worst blow is a blow to basic trust' (2006: 159).

In any science fiction narrative, the relationship between artificial and human intelligences is defined by trust – or at least by the breaking of it. It is this breakdown in mutual faith that so frequently drives a story. Perhaps there is a disconnection between actual and apparent emotion (as displayed by either party) leading to inaccurate perceptions and loss of trust. Of *2001*'s HAL, Nofz and Vendy comment that 'all of HAL's "emotional" responses are methodically matched to situations, within a broader framework of a coolly detached logic' (2002: 38). Yet to Bowman, the astronaut interacting with HAL, these emotions can appear real and even malicious. When an intelligence presents as

emotional, even if only through mimicry, that emotion can be taken as actual.

Perhaps the machines are breaking out of their imposed inferior status, thus losing the trust of those who saw them as controllable tools instead of the next potential stage in evolution. Potentially those machines are also capable of taking on human emotional strengths 'that humans have left behind' (Toles 2006: 161) in their desire to embrace new technological identities. This is one of the perceived potential threats of HAL, that he 'interacts with the other members [of the crew] as an equal (or even a superior), rather than as a tool' (Loren 2008: 213). This possibility of active superiority is a dramatically tense one: 'The prospect that *Homo sapiens* is not the final evolutionary stage of humankind promises Utopia for some, Dystopia for others' (Rossini 2005: 26). The dystopian reaction results from a sense of biological inferiority, where 'the greater share of alienation ... derives from the physical nature of humanity ... chief of which is, of course, its rather limited shelf life' (Geraci 2008: 147). The Mima, recall, has greater sensory capacity than that of the human passengers. It is also the only intelligence capable of surviving the entirety of the journey to Lyra. This isn't the real source of conflict and trust loss between intelligences within the text, however. That begins with the first potential break (described above) and concludes with the final possibility.

The loss of trust between parties may also be reversed, as it is in *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, where the child-machine David is abandoned by his caretaker and must fend for himself. Loren describes both David's and HAL's relationships with their human companions as sharing a 'surprisingly similar structure. In each there is a particular dependency in which power relationships are formed' (Loren 2008: 213).

The Mima is also entrenched in power relationships. Initially a tool on a transport ship, circumstances transcend her function within the community, and place her in a position of power aboard the Aniara. Yet her reaction to the destruction at Dourisburg upsets that power relationship again – the Mima is ill-equipped to deal with what she has witnessed. There's no sense in training a tool to deal with such carnage, after all, and she suffers collateral damage regardless, in being forced to witness that destruction and to pass on what she has

witnessed.

The Mima is of course not the first entity in Martinson's poem to suffer a loss of trust. The breakdown in society, the fracturing of narrative that arises from the different reactions to the journey all stem from a similar loss. Technology itself has betrayed the passengers' trust. They are used to it, used to its ills more than anything else – the disadvantages are a constant, but they are a constant that is understood and familiar. War, overpopulation, environmental degradation; these can be ameliorated. There is always another planet to go to: Mars, which hangs in the sky as a refuge from nightmare instead of a dream of exploration and new knowledge. Yet technology, stable even in its depredations, was trusted and betrayed that trust. A little thing, dodging an asteroid – or it should have been, and then trust is smashed to bits in the emptiness of space, just as if the Aniara had been hit by the asteroid instead of avoiding it.

Should not the machine created by humans react as a human would react? And at first, Mima does. She has a purpose, which is more than many of the passengers do. (Even if their only purpose was to wait and disembark, and they now find themselves only capable of the former.) That purpose keeps her constant. But after Dourisburg, the Mima's purpose – transmission – has itself become an act of destruction towards her passengers. She might have considered suicide an act of conscience, a means to prevent further damage.

On the seventh day, the Mima tells her Mimarobe of her feelings of guilt, and that she 'sen någon tid var lika samvetsöm / som stenarna. Hon hade hört dem ropa' (58) ('for sometimes past had felt as guilty as the very stones / for she had heard them crying out') (33). Heading towards Lyra, however, the Mima can have no real culpability for the actions that destroyed Dourisburg. Her perceived responsibility can therefore take one of only two forms. Either she feels guilty because she witnesses the results of destructive technology and cannot help those that technology affects, or she feels guilty in her role as the transmitter of that destruction. The text appears to hint at the latter:

> När det behövs ser ändå ingen klart.
> Nej, bara när det galled att slå ner

> och arma ut vad hjärtat sammanspart
> av dröm att leva på i onda kalla år. (54)
>
> (When it is really necessary no one sees clearly anyhow.
> No, only when the point was to destroy,
> to obliterate all that the heart had saved
> of dreams to live on through cold evil years) (30).

The Mima's different, greater perspective means that her failure lies in details: she cannot sufficiently take on the perspective of smaller entities in order to stop herself from causing them hurt. As she does in microcosm with the navigator, so she does to all with Dourisburg. Her purpose is in conflict with her mimetic nature. 'Men det finns inget skydd mot människan' (54) ('there is no protection against man!') (30) and so the Mima is vulnerable to them, and she lacks the perspective necessary to reconcile her nature with her learning. The Mima has absorbed what she sees and experiences, and she has absorbed as well the *consequences* of what she sees, when the passengers of Aniara are made proxies for and by her.

Her guilt can only be assuaged by minimising the consequences of her further actions. The Mima's purpose is to transmit, and if she cannot do that without guilt then she has no purpose at all. Without that purpose, her life is like that of the passengers: it has no meaning. The imitator has imitated too well, and as the passengers fall prey to despair so does the Mima. The consequences of her mimetic behaviour are the root cause of her suicide.

The too-competent mimesis of artificial intelligence is something frequently explored in science fiction. It is the Turing Test writ large, a technological progression sufficient enough so that no distinction can be made between the artificial and the biological. The Mima doesn't have android form so some distinction remains, but all too often the inability to distinguish is the root cause of conflict between the biological natural and the artificially created. When the Mima mimics too closely, she takes on the human characteristics of grief and crippling despair. This level of mimesis does not lead to external conflict, as it does in science fiction narratives where increased competence often leads

to increased resentment (in *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, it's the android 'Mecha' that provoke distrust and hatred, not the small teddy-bear robot that is clearly distinct in appearance and function from human beings). Instead, the conflict is internal, and takes place entirely within the Mima, until she resolves it with her death.

The Mima as Narrative

The above interpretations of the Mima are arguably correct as far as they go, but represent little more than a surface reading of the text; important as a basis for further discussion, but limited. Another may be observed with a deeper reading: the interpretation of the Mima as *narrative*. While the Mima lives, narrative exists as part of the life of the Aniara. With her death, however, that narrative fragments. It breaks down into something that is no longer a cohesive whole. And when the Mima dies

> De sista ord hon sände var en hälsning
> från en som nämnde sig Den söndersprängde.
> Hon lät Den söndersprängde själv få vittna
> och stammande och söndersprängt berätta
> hur svårt det alltid är att söndersprängas (58)

> (The final words she uttered were a message
> sent by the Victim of Disintegration.
> She let this witness testify for himself
> and stammering, incoherent, tell
> how ghastly fission is in mind and body) (34)

This fission of the individual – of both the victims of Dourisburg and the Mima – reflects that which happened with the burning destruction of Dourisburg. As Dourisburg's narrative fissions into fragments and ending, so too does that of her observers aboard the Aniara. Indeed, the absence of narrative as an externalised, overarching force within the story is underlined by the passengers' own removal from, or refusal of, narrative: their desire to stop a story before it even begins. This can

be most effectively illustrated in Song 41, which is titled (as few songs are titled) 'Barnet' ('The Child'). Here, Martinson describes the death of a child, an infant who has been deliberately killed by its own mother, in what she sees as kindness.

> Chebeba satt i sina bästa år
> med gränslös lycka vid en liten bår.
> På båren låg den lilla rosenknopp
> hon hade skyddat från att växa opp
> i Aniaras stad. (92)

> (Chebeba sat in her most fruitful year
> in deepest bliss beside a tiny bier
> where lay the little rosy bud
> that she had saved from growing up
> in Aniara's realm.) (53)

It is important here to note the mother's reaction to her dead baby. Chebeba has 'gränslös lycka' (she is 'in deepest bliss'); she is exalted by the child's death. She feels justified in her actions, and believes that she has done an admirable thing in saving her baby from life aboard the spaceship. She is not the only one to have this reaction. The reactions of three other women are also described in Song 41, and their reactions are all approving. Yaal says to the child that 'du reser hem. Själv får vi vara kvar / i Aniaras stad' (92) ('You are going home. But we must stay on here / in Aniara's realm') (53). Gena follows, describing the child as one 'som somnat utan brist och fel / i Aniaras stad' (92) ('you, who, released from sin and wrong / sleep quietly in Aniara's realm') (53). And finally there is Heba, who said nothing but could only watch 'och se hur barnet nu med lugna drag / i rymden sov sig hän mot dagars dag / från Aniaras stad' (93) ('the tiny child so peacefully / sleep on in space, borne towards the Day of Days / borne on, away / from Aniara's realm') (54).

   The child's death is a cessation of narrative. The life that could have been is snuffed out, because the stories it is assumed that child would have lived are deemed thin and insufficient. They are stories of another

generation of wandering and aimlessness – mindless repetition that is no new story but the re-enactment of stories that have gone before. In effect, the child is a mimetic being in an environment where mimesis has led to despair and suicide. One can only infer the mother's reasoning: she has given birth to a child whom she loves and wants to do well by, but that child is doomed to acting out a stale part – it can never be more than a mimetic construct, denied real authenticity by the circumstances of its birth. Better that that story be cut off as the story of the Mima was cut off. The fragmentation of narrative, of *mimetic* narrative, destroys the inherent value originally held by that narrative.

It is arguable that here the Mima sets off another mimetic narrative. Recall that the passengers on the Aniara began to treat the artificial intelligence as a source of almost religious consolation, a perspective underlined by the possible interpretation of the Mima as a soul. Richardson points out that 'the robot has historically been a way to talk about dehumanization and the elevation of the nonhuman' (2015: 5). This has often been explored in science fiction through the lens of conflict, but in the case of the Mima, that elevation has almost reached apotheosis; the Mima is adored and worshipped. With her death, the human element is left alone, and it does not benefit. In that sense, the dehumanizing presence of the technology is emphasised even in its absence.

The Mima's death, therefore, can be said to inspire another mimetic set of events – except this time, instead of the Mima learning to mimic the humans around her, those humans have begun to mimic the Mima. If one of their primary religious influences succumbs to despair and suicide, then the proper course of events might well be to follow suit; and thus the cessation of mimetic narrative continues.

The death of Chebeba's child is a foreshadowing of later events. Towards the end of the voyage the desire of the passengers to stop their own narrative – or the narratives of others – peaks. 'Även mänskooffret kom till heders' (203) ('Even human sacrifice was reintroduced') (121) comments the Mimarobe, although this is too dramatic a set-piece to last long. 'Dock kom dessa offer snart ur modet / i vår krets som ingen styrka fann / i det slappt besvurna offerblodet' (204) (they 'soon lost

their interest / for us since we could find no redemption / in sacrificial blood, indifferently offered') (121). This lack of redemption, the lack of capacity for a new life brought on by sacrifice, is another indication of failing narrative. The idea of sacrifice sparks an initial interest, but when it is found to be useless the sacrificers revert to the same belief that killed the child: that nothing can be changed, that mimicry of life is all that is left. The Mimarobe remembers 'den stund då tusen vårar / mot evig vinter gick i Mimas hall' (131) ('the time when a thousand Springs / turned to eternal winter in Mima's hall') (76), and this is a perfect encapsulation of the sterility of life aboard the Aniara. There is never any chance for new stories to be made; all the passengers can do is act out the old ones, knowing that they are acting. That knowledge delegitimizes their parts, and further encourages the perception of life upon the spaceship as a pale echo of a prior story.

In the end, the Aniara becomes a sarcophagus, with none of the passengers able to cope with their despair at the immensity of space.

> I början av det tjugofjärde året
> bröt tanken samman, fantasin dog ut.
> Förkrossad av det ständigt ofattbara
> hos en galaktisk stjärnrymd utan slut,
> föll varje dröm till föga .... (210)
>
> (All thought collapsed and imagination died
> at the beginning of the twenty-fourth year.
> Crushed by the unending incomprehensibility
> of heaven's reaches stretching to infinity
> all our dreams gave up) (125)

The structure of the poem mimics this narrative fragmentation. It is not unusual for the form of a poem to underline its meaning, and *Aniara* is no exception. In this case, the primary form is an epic narrative, the story of a journey that dwarfs the lifetimes of those undertaking it. An epic journey, Swanson states, is a 'classical metaphor for learning' (1996: 74). It is a learning experience not only for the characters, but also for the audience: 'if we are honest readers, the poem becomes *our*

journey as well' (1996: 74). One way of doing this is to make sure that the readers 'have some physical experience of Time that is similar to the journey's time' (1996: 74). In the case of the *Aniara* poem, this is clearly impossible: the poem spans generations of journey-time, and even the slowest reader will be able to finish the text in a fraction of that time. Yet by making the poem itself an epic, Swanson argues that the reader's experience of the poem is elongated, a technique that both mimics the length of the voyage and underlines it.

Yet there is another, subtler form tucked within the narrative: a variation in form that comments on the narrative itself. As mentioned above, *Aniara* is divided into poetic cantos that the text refers to as 'Songs'. Nine of these Songs have an alternate title. For instance, Song 41 is also known as 'The Child', Song 49 as 'Den blinda' ('The Blind Poetess'), Song 54 as 'Chefones trädgård' ('Chefone's Garden'). These nine named Songs share one characteristic: they all occur *after* the Mima's death. Granted, the Mima dies in the 29th Song, not even a third of the way through the text, and it could be mere coincidence that all named Songs occur after this. However, these songs frequently illustrate and encapsulate the story of a single, particular person.

Prior to the Mima's death, the narrative was largely macroscopic, focused on the community rather than the individuals comprising that community. After her death, however, that narrative begins to fracture, and individual strands come to the fore. Yet none of these have the ability to bind the community together as the Mima bound them with her transmissions, and as their individual stories fragment so does the community aboard the Aniara. 'Vi lyssnar spänt' (115) ('We listen, entranced') (65) says the Mimarobe of the Blind Poetess, 'Men bara ord det är och bara vind' (116) ('but they are only words, borne on the wind') (66). Although applicable to many passengers, the 'Song of the Blind Poetess' is not enough to bind the community back together against the dark. It remains a discrete entity, a micro-text within the wider epic and representative of a single individual.

Cults and violence begin to appear, and if there are brief images of unity (that of the choir, for instance) these are undermined by the stifling of anything but the slow disintegration of the community and its inevitable death: 'Jag efter jag brast sönder och försvann' (216)

('soul after soul broke down and vanished') (128). This, the Mimarobe intimates, is an inevitable consequence of the Mima's death. 'All den eld som i oss brunnit / tog sitt ljus, sin själ ur Mimas våg' (203) ('All the fire that used to burn within us / derived its light, its soul, from Mima's waves') (120). The Mima's narrative allowed a form of communal warmth, cocooned within the Aniara as it travelled within deep space. Without those transmission waves, that warmth died out and the interior of the spaceship began to more closely resemble its outside environment: a cold, empty depth punctuated at intervals by individual astronomical phenomena.

That these individualistic strands tend towards the poetic is no coincidence. Sjöberg comments that Martinson's work tends to look at the increase in scientific knowledge in a world that has no concomitant human advancement: 'there is not a development of human sensitivity comparable to the theoretical conquest of outer space' (1974: 480) and it is in this narrative imbalance (with the story of the technological growing out-of-pace with that of the human) that the poet has his place. That place is *communicative*: interpreting science in a form that is more comprehensible to the reading audience. This is not to say, as Sjöberg continues, 'that the poet should be an adjunct to science. However, the poet should not avoid science; on the contrary, he should build his creation more closely according to the findings of science' (1974: 480). Martinson's science – technology in a cold and immense universe – is looking for a story that can match it, a story that can take the Aniara to Lyra as a living ship and not a tomb.

Interestingly, Rancière et al. perceive the stranding of the Aniara as a story of utopian possibilities; of 'an alien, solitary universe calling up your deepest capacities' (2008: 406). Yet Martinson's poem is more pessimistic than that. It is difficult to read without wondering if the 'deepest capacity' of the human condition is, in fact, despair. That is certainly the condition that man and machine fall into – with one crucial difference. The Mima can also be interpreted as memory. The keeper of knowledge, a form of giant computer, the Mima as memory-keeper is the fundamental link between Earth and Lyra, between the scientific and poetic narratives.

The Mima might have a name redolent of mimicry and second

thoughts, but her combination of knowledge and memory is also reminiscent of the travelling birds of Scandinavian mythology. Huginn ('thought') and Muninn ('memory') are the two ravens of the Norse god Odin, who sends the birds to fly over the world and bring him back information and knowledge (Cotterell 1996: 201). This is in much the same way as the Mima, flying through space in the Aniara, brings back visions and information of distant places in order to feed the knowledge-requirements of the ship's passengers.

Furthermore, there is in Scandinavian mythology a giant called Mimer, and it is at his spring that Odin acquired his famous wisdom and knowledge – at a cost. After his time at Mimer's spring Odin only has one eye, and the passengers can be said to share this condition, metaphorically, at least. Their ability to see is affected by their position in the universe. The closer they are to Earth, to the pollution and atomic war and overpopulation that science has wrought there, the more they see through the lens of science. Technology is their primary concern: how it affects their environment, how it can take them between planets and keep them alive as they travel through the vacuum of space. Yet as their journey continues, the time and effort they spend thinking about science lessens. As they get closer to Lyra, the pull of poetry, of religion and metaphor, begins to supersede the science-knowledge of Earth, especially when the Mima is not there to even the scales.

Often the presence of artificial intelligence is the unbalancing factor within a narrative, the social or scientific change that propels the story into conflict. Whether it is threatening (and possibly murderous) behaviour by a computer aboard a spacecraft, or the courtroom battle of an artificial intelligence to change its legal status (as in Isaac Asimov's 1976 story *The Bicentennial Man*), it is the conflict that challenges the status quo and drives the drama. In contrast, the Mima has a *balancing* effect on her associated human society. She is a largely comforting and stabilising presence, and it is only after her suicide that the Lyra influence begins to overwhelm the community aboard the Aniara. In her absence, poetry is ascendant. It becomes the lens through which the inhabitants of the Aniara view both the universe and their place in it.

As Smith observes (1998: 333) of the Mimarobe, 'The moments of

melancholy come mostly in relation to his longing for a past now gone but for the poetic capturing of it'. As the Aniara moves closer to Lyra, those melancholy moments become more and more common, and the poetic emphasis on the past is apotheosised over the scientific preoccupation with the future and progress. The Lyra influence takes over from the over-emphasis on technology, the 'cult of the engineer … old and passionless, a denial of the richness of life' (Johannesson 1960: 188) that Martinson deplored.

In her writing on artificial intelligence, Figueroa-Sarriera emphasises 'the need to see technological discourses as … spaces for struggle' (1995: 134). The relationships and events in *Aniara* are defined by technology. How the passengers attempt – and fail – to find meaning and purpose in the presence (and absence) of that technology is one of the major struggles within the text, as Martinson intends it to be. Granted, *Aniara* was written over five decades ago, but prescient science fiction writers of the 1950s, such as Isaac Asimov, were looking ahead to societies where artificial intelligence was becoming a norm. And, as Solarewicz points out, 'the cultural analysis of strong AI in science fiction is the analysis of now' (2015: 112). Martinson uses the *Aniara* text to engage with what he felt to be a contemporary issue: the human response to technology which can replace us, even outstrip us. His own response is a poetic one, but pragmatism exists in the text as well as prophecy. The Aniara travels a continuum between science and poetry, and shows the effects of too much of either on a society. If wallowing in science and eschewing poetry lends itself to ecological destruction, then the reverse leads to stagnation and an almost religious level of despairing passivity.

Science, possibly more than any other discipline, is built upon memory. It is a cumulative, progressive discipline as described by both McKeon (1952) and Arnett (1956), where each new idea, each newly discovered fact, is built carefully upon the work of others. Science without memory is crippled: a lame narrative of disparate fact.

It is no coincidence that when the Mima collapses, essentially committing suicide, the loss of her memory affects the travellers of the Aniara in different ways. The building blocks of science are lost with her death; even today, individuals rely upon computers or books

to store previously discovered scientific knowledge, being incapable of retaining all the available information themselves. As such, the ability of the passengers to use or recreate previously available scientific knowledge, and consequently the ability to create new knowledge, is severely limited. As the travellers die off or become incapacitated, scientific and technological literacy decreases, leading to breakdowns and other deficiencies. This is a *regressive* process, one mimicking the breakdown of narrative, and one that proceeds as the Aniara continues on its journey: the further in space the passengers are from the science-representative Earth, and the further in time they are from the Mima, the more their scientific memory is compromised. The binding idea of narrative is too entwined with the Mima to extricate.

Conclusion

Aniara is unusual in contemporary science fiction explorations of artificial intelligence in that it is a fundamentally a narrative of *absence*. It is useful here to compare it to the artificial intelligence narratives defined by the continued *presence* of such an intelligence. In these the privileged position of science remains intact, and the scientific memory is retained throughout the text. Often, in fact, the narrative is strongly defined and linear, often streamlined around a theme of conflict between the artificial and the human. Note here the fate of the unlicensed Mecha in *AI: Artificial Intelligence*. They are destroyed in front of cheering crowds in an almost carnival atmosphere, designed to 'exploit and express social fears ... of artificiality' (Morris 2007: 307) resulting from the increasing antipathy of humanity for androids.

This conflict between human and machine, present in many science fiction narratives, compresses narrative. Whether the resolution to that conflict is diplomatic or warlike, the two sides move closer towards each other as their stories develop. The progression of the narrative implicitly reinforces the place of science within the narrative: as the discipline moves forward, so does the story. This is not the case in *Aniara*, where scientific regression is linked with narrative dissolution.

The loss of scientific narrative that dies with the technological construct, the cessation of individual life-narratives in mimicry of the

Mima's death, and the lack of a cohesive communal narrative while the individual narratives fragment and disintegrate underline Martinson's response to the immense in *Aniara*. That response is bound in with the existence of the Mima, and is as much narrative as it is mimetic.

Endnote

[1] Quotations from the poem are taken from the 1963 edition of *Aniara* (Martinson 1963a). All translations of the poem, quoted in brackets followed by page reference, are taken from Hugh MacDiarmid and Elspeth Harley Schubert's 1963 translation of *Aniara* (Martinson 1963b).

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