

Analise Electra Smith-Hinkley

### **Perdido Street Station: The Hybrid Zone, Crisis Energy, and Fluidity of Transition**

The world of New Crobuzon is in so many ways foul and decrepit, reeling with stench, corruption, and darkness, almost every description underlining its perpetual desolation as a sort of lost city. And yet it is vivid in its filth: the dead, sick, and twisted serve to highlight the very vivacious quality of the living. Countless species unimaginable compete and cooperate amongst each other in a city whose very buildings and technology exude life. The figurehead of government, Parliament has walls akin to “skin,” whose inner workings are constantly in motion, “spring loaded teeth” crunching numbers and gears perpetually (87), while mechanical constructs come to develop their own consciousness using a half-live human avatar as a means of communication; everywhere life abounds, boundaries undefined. It is as Isaac and his cohorts attempt to articulate the nature of the world around them amidst all these competing forces that the overarching principles are revealed under which life in Perdido Street Station is governed. The manner in which the concepts of hybrid zone, crisis energy, and fluidity of transition come together renders an understanding of life as being ultimately unbounded, a simultaneous existence of parts and wholes that in the end, can be understood best only in terms of its profound aesthetics.

#### *The Hybrid Zone*

When Mr. Motley first meets with Lin to discuss his commission proposal, he explains that khepri women, with their human body and scarab body head, are as a sort of composite of two different parts just as they are simultaneously a whole, unique entity; he suggests that this is a common feature of all races, and it is precisely that concept in which he is interested: “the zone

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where the disparate become part of the whole. The hybrid zone.” It is furthermore what defines the entire world, he says, “I believe this to be the fundamental dynamic. Transition. The point where one thing becomes another. It is what makes you, the city, the world, what they are” (37). This hybrid zone is indeed visible throughout New Crobuzon, most grotesquely immediate in the Remade, whose transitions are crude, forced, and unpleasant, but also in more subtle avenues like the city itself, which winds through train stations, into glass domes, and even serves as the organs in the ancient ribcage that marks Bonetown. In these examples the hybrid zone is fairly accessible in that the transitions are static, easily identifiable, but it is a striking feature of New Crobuzon that these transitions are not usually so markedly concrete. In addition to the Remade who may just have animal limbs in place of their own, there are those who are hideously deformed in ways that cannot be attributed to one grafting operation or source, just as there are houses as those of the khepri in which khepri spit and mucus blends with inorganic architecture in some places, or where slums spring up daily building upon other houses at random.

The complexity of the hybrid zone interests Mr. Motley because he, so aptly named, is an unfathomable conglomeration of parts, such that Lin feels almost that the transitions are no longer static, but constantly moving, “that the shards of physiognomy that made up his whole reorganized when no one was looking.” It is not necessarily unfounded hallucination on Lin's part that makes her feel this way, that makes her wonder hysterically whether she is suffering punishment just “striving to freeze in time a boy in flux...starting each day from the beginning all over again” (95). New Crobuzon thrives on transition, and not merely static, anatomical distinctions, but a constant variety of fluid changes that permeates every facet of the city (of which the anatomical or structural hybrid zone is just one immediately recognizable reflection). There is the “flow, a relentless wash of abstract instructions” that feeds the constructs, until they

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one day that flow develops such quantity that it approximates concepts and the construct itself

changes: “One moment it was a calculating machine. The next, it thought” (210-11). Or consider

the slake-moth caterpillar as it changes in its cocoon, its transition not one moment of evolution

but a fluid complexity:

Legs and eyes and bristles and body-segments lost their integrity. The tubular body became fluid...Its mutating form bubbled and welled up into strange dimensional rifts, oozing like oily sludge over the brim of the world into other planes and back again...It was unstable...Nothing was visible from the outside The violent process of destruction and creation was a metaphysical drama played out without an audience...After the slow, chaotic collapse of form, there was a brief moment when the thing in the cocoon was poised in a liminal state. And then, in response to unthinkable tides of flesh, it began to construct itself anew. (212-213)

Furthermore, New Crobuzon also embraces variance between *planes* as well, either simultaneous

existence in more than one, or transitions between, or even, in some cases, existence that is

somehow both simultaneous and not. The Ambassador from Hell is presented to the visitor's

open eye as a well dressed man going about his paperwork, but is “replaced' visually by

something else whenever the eye is closed for that “infinitesimal moment,” the room revealing

its “maelstrom of heat” and iron-slatted cages, while the ambassador's true daemon form flickers

hideously: “Where the ambassador sat, Rudgutter caught glimpses of a monstrous form. A

hyaena's head stared at him, tongue lolling. Breasts with gnashing teeth. Hooves and claws”

(242). It is with this understanding of the body of the city as it were- the plethora and fluidity of

transition throughout- that understanding the mind becomes the most important key to defining

life in New Crobuzon.

*“subconscious the dreaming” and Crisis Theory*

The most powerful creatures in the world of New Crobuzon<sup>1</sup> are the Weaver and the slake-moths, creatures for whom restrictions between planes are nonexistent, and who are both

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<sup>1</sup> The Hellkin are certainly remarkable as well, but are somehow governed by the same kind of restrictions that are other sentient beings, subject to overarching rules of existence like humans, thus their fear of the slake-moths, for example.

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fully committed to satisfying, unchecked, their own desires; for the Weavers the world is their canvas, for the slake-moths it is their intoxicating hunting ground. For both, the primary reason for their existence is wrapped in an aesthetic pleasure that is tied to the mind in a way that other people cannot comprehend, the Weaver “attuned to them as objects of beauty disentangleable from the fabric of reality itself” (290), and the slake-moth similarly preying on people's *perception* of that reality, on “the brew that results from self-reflexive thought, when the instincts and needs and desires and intuitions are folded in on themselves” (326). These creatures are unmatched in power apparently because common people simply cannot exist on their comprehensive level, the monsters appear as cruel leeches or unpredictably violent artists. Of Weavers it is said, “They seemed to subsist on the appreciation of beauty. A beauty unrecognized by humans or other denizens of the mundane plane” (290). Slake-moths too, perhaps more directly apparent, work within a realm that encompasses the grander scheme of things, of moments, places, and lives, both subconscious and not. People can attempt to get close to these greater creatures in taking drugs like “dreamshit” which effects not so much a dream as a recognition that there is more existence at once than is normally comprehensible: “Isaac knew this was not a dream...This was a juddering bombardment of infinitely varied moments. Isaac was strafed with a million scintillas of time...every fractioned life juddered as it segued into the next and...awareness and reality intertwined” (158-59). But even in this drug-induced enlightenment there is the sense that one is “eavesdropping” on other creatures' lives, a faint but conscious recognition that it is an induced state. The slake-moths operate on a deeper level that completely removes any ability to rationalize, sucking out the subconscious, stealing dreams. Isaac briefly experiences what it is to *be* only subconsciousness, but of course cannot retrospectively comprehend such since cognition is compromised:

Isaac was the memory of parent-love, the deep sex fantasies and memories, the bizarre neurotic inventions,

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the monsters the adventures, the slips in logic the aggrandizing self-memory the mutating mass of the  
undermind triumphant over ratiocination and cognition and the reflection that spawned it the terrible and  
awesome interlocking charges of subconsciousness the dreaming  
the dreaming (413)

The slake-moths' feeding presents a real, terrifying threat to people because it removes a fundamental part of what it means to be human (or another such sentient being): in an ultimate paradox, humans and other sentient beings of their kind have the ability to *rationalize* occasional resignation to the subconscious (as when they know they dream), even when the subconscious is a realm whose very nature suggests that it exists beyond the throes of cognition. It is this process of “logic tearing itself apart” that is “utterly riddled with crisis” (554).

Crisis Theory, with which Isaac is perpetually obsessed, revels in transitions, as it appears does everything else in New Crobuzon, the concept being that “the transition from one state to another's affected by taking something...to a place where its interactions with other forces make its own energy pull against its current state” (147). The application of crisis theory at base can effect state changes like the ability to fly, but in what is perhaps its most beautiful and fundamental reveal, it speaks to the nature of the mind itself. The combined hook-up of Andrej, the Construct Council, and the Weaver to Isaac's crisis engine underlines that mystery of the human mind. Andrej's mind possesses both “underlying structure and subconscious flow...calculating rationality and impulsive fancy, self-maximising analysis and emotional charge,” (553) suggesting that his mind,  $x$ , equals the sum of the other two,  $y$  and  $z$ . But the latter two are not “half-complete models of  $x$ ,” they are qualitatively different, and so the paradox of the human mind is proven, ironically, through logical failure: “The crisis engine arrived at two simultaneous conclusions:  $x=y+z$  and  $x\neq y+z$ ” (554). The Weaver remarks, this time not so enigmatically, “**ONE AND ONE INTO ONE WON'T GO BUT IT IS ONE AND TWO AT ONCE WILL WE WON HOW WIN HOW WONDERFUL**” (556). It speaks to not only the characteristics of the human mind, but also to what is prevalent throughout the world of New Crobuzon: the

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ability of everything to be at once both parts of a whole, and also their own distinct, different, wholes.

### *All the Lines Converge*

Isaac explains, “It’s the nature of things to enter crisis, as part of what they are. Things turn themselves inside out by virtue of being things, understand?” (147). With the world constantly in some level of crisis, turning itself inside out, there has to be a way in which people can grasp their surroundings without grasping as well a constant nightmarish feeling of that crisis, such as when the slake-moths plague the skies. The solution is reflection- reflection as “we reflect on our thoughts and then reflect on the reflection, endlessly” (326) as Vermishank notes, but also quite literally, distance from the inescapably incomprehensible through reflection. People cannot look at the wings of the slake-moth head on because the ever-changing, inter-plane patterns transfix them, trapping them in a state in which they are beset with feelings that are no longer governed by their human faculties, but are instead surrendered to a state so foreign that it is incomprehensible. Fortunately, looking at the reflection of a slake-moth in a mirror keeps the would-be victim safe. Looking through multiple mirrors, as in a periscope, however, undermines the safety of the mirror, and the victim is susceptible to the wings’ power, a conundrum that puzzles Verminous, Isaac, and others. The key to this conundrum is the notion of distancing oneself from that which cannot be understood; viewing the slake-moth in a mirror gives the viewer an *indirect* presentation of something that seen directly would be literally mindblowing. The addition of more mirrors however counteracts this distance because it splits the image of the slake-moth into multiple projections; just as when in the crisis engine logic tears itself apart when it cannot comprehend how Andrej’s mind can be comprised of two aspects

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without being a *sum* of those parts, the mirror-based fragmentation of the slake-moth into both itself and multiple reflections doesn't provide distance from its mindbending hypnosis, it *magnifies*, it realizes, the paradox. In a similar fashion, questions must be iterated in inversion when addressed to the Ambassador of Hell, in order to maintain the fact that what his visitors are seeing is a reflection of what is actually before them, a safe distance from the reality they see when they close their eyes; to view the reality of the situation would be truly horrifying.

It is not only creatures like humans that must somehow distance themselves from the paradoxes, the incomprehensible, but every being in New Crobuzon. The slake-moths are susceptible to the mechanical constructs because the slake-moths do not recognize the existence of a being without dreams, just as they ultimately fall prey to their own insatiable lust for dreams when they fail to comprehend the power of magnifying, of fully shedding light on, the paradox that is the human mind; they understand only the subconscious. They are not alone in their skewed view, as for everything in New Crobuzon, life is viewed through one lens or another. The Weavers live in a dreamscape without the cold logic of the machines, only recognizing aesthetics, that “drab and lifeless white” in their webs is a problem, an ugly tear that spreads, “taking the multitude of colours and bleeding them dry” (349). The machines find patterns in programme cards and in construct architecture and the convergence of a million cables and flowing patterns but cannot learn empathy, will never have a flood of insight like Isaac in his work. And in spite of all of this, it is hard to escape the realization that at some point, in some level, everything comes together.

The last surviving slake-moth panics and meets its downfall because it is suffering alone, an experience identifiably human: “If its family had survived...it might not have panicked...but it was alone” (588); instead of crawling, flaming onto its hunters below, it dies still and alone in a

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moment that cannot help but elicit sympathy and empathy. The Ambassador of Hell and his kin refuse to help Rudgutter and Parliament out of genuine fear, when the nature of their existence would seem to suggest otherwise, an awful power. The Weaver, the most frighteningly unpredictable seer of the world, deems Isaac “**YOU PEACH YOU PLUMB...LITTLE FOURLIMBED WEAVER THAT YOU MIGHT BE**” (506), suggesting Isaac capable of weaving the world just as much as he whose name already suggests as such. The overlap comes to a head at the end of the novel, when everything comes together at Perdido Street Station, “The city's focal point, where all the lines converge” (511). Mechanical cables of the constructs wind spirally in to the center, militia descends on all sides, and “from all the way across the city, from the four compass points, [the slake-moths] converged” (557).

So the ultimate hybrid zone is attained in the moment of ultimate crisis. The logical paradox of the mind in the crisis engine brings together the disparate parts of New Crobuzon at Perdido Street Station, completing the whole that is the city. New Crobuzon becomes itself the hybrid zone as its many parts, transitions in so many versions and definitions, build in complexity from structural foundation to extend into different perceptions of realities. These parts allow New Crobuzon to constitute the living, changing organism that *is* the ancient beast whose rib skeleton characterizes the city; New Crobuzon is itself the greatest Remade that can be imagined. It is something of profound and indescribable beauty, the beauty of life- as art, not an equation. Derkhan notes of her art, in an apt allusion to the surrounding world, “Art's something you choose to make...it's a bringing together of...of everything around you into something that makes you more human, more khepri, whatever. More of a person” (82). As when Isaac lets out all of his lab subjects into the sunset in a cacophony of flying predator and prey, the savage fight for life is while brutal, not savage enough to undermine the beauty of its chaotic convergence.



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