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The New Human: Posthuman Visions of Changes in Body, Mind and Society after 1900

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The Lab Is Us...

The refreshing thing about *The New Human* is that it tackles the rise of posthumanism – or the intensifying debate about human evolution, transformation and succession, which is led from a variety of angles (the spectrum goes from critical posthumanism to transhumanism one could say) – from a historical angle and thus takes a longer term view (i.e. from around 1900). So even though it is aware of the current environment of vast technological change mainly due to biotechnology and digitalisation, its focus is on how these changes are philosophically and aesthetically underpinned by the rise of the idea of a renewal of humanity ('the new human') in modern literature. The book's self-professed main aim is to 'demonstrate how literature, particularly fiction, contributes to creating a richer and more complex idea of the contexts and issues arising from the idea of a posthuman or new human, and that the idea of the new human is not just something that relates to technology, but has a long history of fascinating humanity' (p. 2). The distinction between the 'new human' and the 'posthuman' introduced here is that 'the latter refers to a break with the human species at a genetic level', whereas 'the new human also covers the idea of changes in human mindset and culture' (2). A further distinction made is the one between the 'posthuman' and 'posthumanism': 'Whereas "posthuman" suggests a transcendence toward a new mode of being, the idea of "posthumanism" signals a shift in the mode of thinking about humankind's place in the universe, particularly its place among other species on the planet' (6).

The methodological approach the volume takes is also a major strength. Although, as Thomsen readily admits, 'the concrete developments of technology are shaping the horizon of thought at any given moment, by both constraining some visions of the future, and creating the opportunity for others' (3) – or what one might call 'affordances' – he chooses to focus on 'how a number of related questions concerning the relationships between individual and collective, normality and improvement, and memory and future, find different expressions in ways that perhaps only literature can articulate' (3). Only literature... this surely seems like a bold claim, especially in such 'numerate' times. What exactly is it, regarding the new human and the posthuman that only literature might be able to articulate? Thomsen names a number of possibilities: literature's ability to 'scrutinize the potential for re-enchantment and risk of alienation' (9), as well as a 'coherent artistic rendition' that connects individuality and collectivity, an ability to combine ethical with aesthetic questions, and the articulation between cultural memory and 'the complexities of human existence' (9).

Historically, the book divides the development of the theme of the 'new human' in literature into three phases: a post/Nietzschean, hopeful phase at the beginning of the 20th century, a mid-20th-century ideological-utopian phase, and a 'biological' (or maybe eugenic) phase towards the end of the 20th century. These phases are mapped out in the following onto literary examples from Virginia Woolf to Michel Houellebecq. The core assumptions that underpin Thomsen's argument are neatly summarised on pp. 11-12, namely that aesthetic reactions to 'human change' can range from 'alienation' to 're-enchantment' and that 'the theme of the posthuman can reinvigorate the status and use of canonical works of art and literature' (12). However, arguably the most important

propositions are that, on the one hand, 'literature has an extraordinary capacity to link the individual with the collective, in a transformation of the past and a vision of the future' (11), and, on the other hand, that 'at any given point in time, the intertwining of consciousness, sociality and biology is crucial to the historical view of change, to literature's descriptions of effected and envisioned change, and ultimately, to how humanity views itself and its future' (10). The challenge thus lies in combining the traditionally liberal humanist belief in the transformative potential of literature on the one hand, with a bio-cogno-evolutionary and systemic model of society (Thomsen refers to both, Francis Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future* (15) and Luhmannian systems theory (17ff) here), on the other hand. This ambitious conceptual framework also underpins Thomsen's 'ethical' stance vis-à-vis the 'posthuman', including its prefiguration in the form of the 'new human' in the 20th century. Looking at the changing figuration patterns of human self-understanding in literature and society also raises the question of the role of technology in cultural and political change. Against the current rise of 'posthumanism' as a new grand narrative ('in contrast to the situation a century and a half ago, technology plays a much larger role, and foregrounds the question of what humanity can become, between past and future, mind, body and society, and individual and collective' (16)), Thomsen takes a liberal political stance in suggesting that 'this book is written out of the conviction that... the capacity of individuals and societies alike to describe and imagine their past, present and future provides them with a greater capacity to adapt to and handle change' (15). And this, precisely, is the role he attributes to literature.

The selection of texts that Thomsen produces to track the figure of the 'new human' and to demonstrate the connection between social, literary or cultural and biological change in human or humanity's self-understanding is wide-ranging and strategic at the same time. He deliberately leaves out the genre science fiction, for example, because in his view 'the most stimulating representations of the new human are not found in the most explicit and manifest descriptions of the new human, which are often constructed with a certain sensationalism and hyperbole' (15). Instead, he starts from the 'juncture of the physical body, linguistic awareness and social communication' to 'historicize the new human since 1900, according to three dominant ideas of change, namely the body, mind and society' (17). The systems theory approach is thus combined with an evolutionary view of cultural history in which nevertheless the idea of the human and literature take on a special place. Consequently, Thomsen narrates the cultural and systemic shifts of the three phases he sees within the changing views on human self-identity in the 'long' twentieth century from Nietzsche to Fukuyama, Luhmann, Kurzweil and Hayles. These phases he refers to as a 'spiritual' modernist phase that spans from the Nietzschean overman to the futurist avant-garde and both World Wars; this is followed by a second, ideological phase characterised by communism and decolonisation; and, finally, there is a contemporary genetic, biotechnological or pharmacological phase in which the idea of the 'posthuman' (or 'biotechnological enhanced human') holds sway. According to Thomsen conceptualisations of contemporary human change also come in three forms – 'normalization, improvement and perfection' (59) – and range from human 'self-cultivation' to genomic intervention and cyborgisation. This neat model is then tested on the individual readings of literary texts.

While the historical account of human-machine-media integration is by now fairly well established, what stands out in Thomsen's account is thus the role attributed to literature, which he claims 'thrives on criticizing the idea of human change and the new human' (70). This is despite literature's 'blind spot' with regard to generating 'ideas of better worlds': 'Literature's seemingly inherent logic or need for being critical, and its limited capacity to produce positive visions of the future, may render literature excessively pessimistic, in a way that might be regarded inherently problematic' (71). What is here described as the critical and dystopic tendency in literature – as progressiveness of form and conservatism of content – one could argue stands in the way of a truly 'posthumanist' literature: 'Particularly with regard to the physical changes that biotechnology assists, it is difficult to

find works of fiction that convincingly address prolonged lives, improved treatments of disease, and improvements to physical, emotional and intellectual capacities' (73). One might think, against the run of the argument that this doesn't bode well for the future of literature – might there be something essentially 'humanist' about the literary, after all? Or are 'we' currently just facing a temporal horizon within literature's history, which momentarily precludes 'us' from imagining a postliterary future in the humanist sense? It is arguably the formulation of this paradoxical nature of literature in dealing with the 'new human' that constitutes the most important achievement of Thomsen's study. He is making a strong case for literature, even if this might come across as mere utilitarianism: 'Throughout history, literature has demonstrated that it is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, medium by which a collected presentation of the human condition may be offered in a mode that considers the past, interprets the present and, as the passage of time has often shown, forecasts future events or warns against what may happen' (77). Making memories public and connecting individual and collective imagination are of course not the exclusive domain of literature – which is apparent in the designation of literature as a 'medium' (one among many) and as a specific phase within the human externalisation of memory. This means that historicizing literature cannot avoid the price of relativization. Proponents of a 'strong' notion of the literary will probably want to insist on a much more essential relationship between humanity, culture and writing (or the 'letter'). It is indeed debatable if humanism (as Peter Sloterdijk argues for example) was merely a 'communitarian fantasy' of a 'model of a literary society, in which participation through reading the canon reveals a common love of inspiring messages' (Sloterdijk 2009: 13) which is now coming to an end.

In any case, what Thomsen's book ultimately highlights is that a relativization of literature requires new forms of legitimation for it, as well as for literary criticism. If 'literature is historically conditioned to combine abstract thinking with specific situation' (89) then modernism can indeed be seen as a formal symptom of (human) self-transformation (the 'emptiness experienced by modern humans' (91) and a 'profound hope for changing the mental software that permeates people's minds' (92)). Even if Virginia Woolf's, William Carlos Williams's and Louis-Ferdinand Céline's work may not be exclusively motivated by exploring new ways of more or less hopeful or disenchanting reconstructions between individual and collective human self-understanding, Thomsen's readings constitute a powerful and legitimate avenue to pursue. Similarly, from a literary point of view, Chinua Achebe's, Orhan Pamuk's and Mo Yan's texts are more than commentaries of more or less totalitarian social change but within the framework set up here they certainly benefit from recontextualisation with regard to the 'new human'. And of course, the line of writers from H.G. Wells to Michel Houellebecq is not solely devoted to the demonstration of how 'the lure of physical changes to human bodies also influences societies and human mindsets' (169), but read from a posthumanist point of view the theme of individual and social embodiment is of central importance.

In this sense, the final section of the volume, which starts with a short chapter called 'Literature as Lab', and which refers to the biotechnological regime of the third phase of literature's involvement in the production of the new human, takes on more general significance. From the modernist search for a new form to the ideological phase of social engineering to the age of the genome, the lab, in this sense, is 'where' literature has always 'taken place'. The important thing to remember, however, is that literature hasn't just been happening 'in' the lab, that it is not just a 'figural' representation of a changing social institution, and that it cannot just remain such a social institution. The fact is that the way in which humans have been understanding themselves throughout modernity (but possibly already long before that) is essentially connected to that process of self-alienation and self-confirmation that takes place within that strange temporality which is found in and produced through fictional writing. Whether this understanding of literature is coming to an end is another

story. Given this 'posthumanist' context, the ultimate humanist belief, necessarily carried forward today into the 'figure of the new or posthuman' is that 'the lab *is* us'.

Works cited:

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