

## Chapter 5 | Postmodern

Stefan Herbrechter

Children, who will inherit the world. Children to whom, throughout history, stories have been told, chiefly but not always at bedtime, in order to quell the restless thoughts; whose need of stories is matched only by the need adults have of children to tell stories to, of receptacles for their stock of fairy-tales, of listening ears on which to unload these most unbelievable yet haunting of fairy-tales, their own lives; children - ...<sup>1</sup>

### *A Generation Game*

I suppose I was one of those (belated) children to whom Jean-François Lyotard tried to explain the postmodern.<sup>2</sup> Like the children and the pupils of Mr Crick, the history teacher in Graham Swift's novel *Waterland*, whose subject is being 'cut down' (a way understanding the phrase 'the end of history', literally), I was spell-bound by the stories that my teachers had to tell about their time and their lives. And like the pupils in Mr Crick's history lessons during which he – in good postmodernist fashion – mixes historical facts and autobiographical fiction<sup>3</sup> – I was at once skeptical of the 'factuality' of their discourse but at the same time I was fascinated with the earnestness of their desires and anxieties. Mr Crick comes across as a very nostalgic man, a dinosaur, who has grown up in the Fens and whose childhood is very much a part of the post WWII 'sense of an ending',<sup>4</sup> which is also the time of the postmodern as an 'attitude' and of postmodernism as a 'style'.

In the filmic adaptation,<sup>5</sup> Mr Crick is played – with the suitable mixture of melancholia and disillusion – by Jeremy Irons, while the teaching takes place, also very appropriately, somewhere in the USA. Where else should the end of history occur than in the USA? It adds a very interesting dimension to the novel, namely the question of globalization, the past, present and future of a certain idea of Europe, the slowness needed for the painful work of literal re-member-ing. So like those children I was in a sense the 'receptacle' of ideas about postmodernism and living (through) the end of history – 'those most unbelievable yet haunting fairy-tales'. And I admired, and still do, the times when ideas about something as abstract as 'the Western metaphysics of presence' (Derrida) and 'the incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard) could lead to an intellectual rift between individuals that would last a lifetime and would produce stunning and beautiful, provocative and highly idiosyncratic works of theory that read like fiction.

And I feel that I am gradually turning into a Mr Crick myself – out of joint with 'my' time – a time which has become so much more complex, chaotic and unfathomable, so much more difficult to theorise, so much less sure of the foundations that need 'deconstructing', and which instead, in fact, increasingly deconstruct themselves, faster and faster. So Mr Crick's exasperation with the next generation is quickly becoming my own – it's turning into a generation game:

I know what you feel. I know what you think, when you sit in your rows, in attitudes of boredom, listlessness, resentment, forbearance, desultory concentration. I know what all children think when submitted to the regimen of history lessons, to spooned-down doses of the past: 'But what about Now? Now, we are Now. What about Now?' (*Waterland*, 60)

So in the face of (the postmodern) 'legacy' – the haunting of a life, the 'here and now' – lose their edge, and the future looks closed while the past opens up like a vast territory, inexhaustible and daunting. Daunting and haunting, history – the only thing that seemingly *is* – the sum of our material inscriptions or traces, the sum of our effects and affects and their bearings on materiality, the world and time – weighs me down.

So the postmodern is about the next generation, and thus about childhood and education. However, it would be a little rash to assume that this generation game is straightforward, in the sense: after the postmodern, the posthuman, from postmodernism to posthumanism. This is why I'd like to return briefly to Lyotard – the thinker of the postmodern *par excellence* (who is also very much a philosopher of childhood and of education). His notion of childhood is far from romantic, however – it is quite the opposite of Rousseau's idea of the child as the unspoiled proto-human – instead the child for Lyotard is, in a very specific sense, 'posthumanist', or, more precisely, the child is the embodiment of Lyotard's idea of the 'inhuman':

What shall we call human in humans, the initial misery of their childhood, or their capacity to acquire a 'second' nature which, thanks to language makes them fit to share in communal life, adult consciousness and reason? That the second depends on and presupposes the first is agreed by everyone. The question is only that of knowing whether this dialectic, whatever name we grace it with, leaves no remainder.<sup>6</sup>

Childhood as 'remainder' is the crux of the 'inhuman' for Lyotard, and it is also one of the main motivations behind his radical questioning of humanism. Moreover, it is that which drives the strange (temporal) logic that is at work in the prefix 'post-' (whether that be the post in postmodern or posthuman):

The child is eminently the human because its distress heralds and promises things possible. Its initial delay in humanity, which makes it the hostage of the adult community, is also what manifests to this community the lack of humanity it is suffering from, and which calls on it to become more human. (*The Inhuman*, 4)

*The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* is very much a reassessment of Lyotard's earlier work on the 'post-', and demonstrates what might be called the 'posthumanist' shift in his work. Lyotard is no longer convinced of the adequacy of the term 'postmodern', which, by and large, has been misinterpreted as some form of linear succession (namely quite simply as 'after the modern'). However, Lyotard is more than ever convinced of the peculiar temporal logic that is at work in the prefix 'post-', but, in *The Inhuman*, he is looking for ways of rearticulating this logic. We are thus dealing with Lyotard's very own attempt to reinscribe the 'post-' of the postmodern into something that, today, is increasingly called (not the inhuman, maybe unfortunately, or the nonhuman) but the posthuman.

*Post-*

In order to understand the discussion and theoretical controversies about the postmodern in roughly the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century one has therefore to explain the curious logic that arises out of the prefix 'post-'. This is all the more urgent since this logic also applies to the posthuman and posthumanism of course. The postmodern has a

more complex logical and temporal relation with the modern than linearity and causality.<sup>7</sup> Instead of superseding the modern, the postmodern asks questions of modernity as that period within history that understands itself as the embodiment of novelty and progress. In particular it queries how 'newness' enters the world and thus asks about the modern politics of change. A modern attitude, according to its postmodern critique, always appropriates and incorporates the new, by assimilating it to its own categories. It only recognizes as 'progress' what can be extrapolated and projected into the future and is thus governed by circularity and self-fulfilling prophecy. The post- hopes to inject a nonlinear and non-causal temporal and spatial relation into the modern dialectic of progress. In always anticipating change and reducing newness to a paradigm of similarity and difference (which creates a sense of the new as that which can only be experienced after the event and is therefore never new in the strict sense), modernity forecloses the arrival of something radically 'new' (e.g. that which is even too modern to be modern). Postmodern, strictly speaking, gestures towards this alterity of the radically new, as an other future.

This produces some very characteristic conceptual and stylistic or aesthetic moves in postmodernist literature, criticism and theory. The motivation for these moves lies in the increasing impatience and frustration with the interminability of the 'project' of modernity. This motivation is not so much concerned with the end of history as such, but rather with the question: what can be done for an other history to begin at last. In Peter Sloterdijk's words, (late) modernity is thus the time of the 'epilogue':

On the one hand, modernity can perceive only the worst after itself; on the other hand, the worst lies precisely in its own course, which it prevents itself from leaving, because it holds no alternative to itself as thinkable.<sup>8</sup>

To understand the curious feeling of being postmodern is to see it as the expression of the sentiment of living somehow after the end, after surviving the last and living on, before the next apocalypse. Postmodern survival, or being 'in-between', could be described as the time of waiting for the event, the birth of an entirely other history ('the birth of history from the spirit of deferral'<sup>9</sup>). The ghostly 'untimeliness' of the late or postmodern feeling as coming after the possibility of anything new accounts for the sense of unreality and the temporal undecidability inscribed into the very paradox of the post- as coming before *and* after, at the same time.<sup>10</sup> The post- thus upsets the modern urge for periodization (before – after) by deconstructing the notion of 'presence' or of the 'here and now' (which would be necessary to establish a distinction between before and after, pre- and post-), as Lyotard explains:

[I]t is impossible to determine the difference between what has taken place... and what comes along... without situating the flux of events with respect to a now. But it is no less impossible to grasp any such '*now*' since, because it is dragged away by what we call the flow of consciousness, the course of life, of things, of events, whatever — it never stops fading away. So that it is always both too soon and too late to grasp anything like a '*now*' in an identifiable way.<sup>11</sup>

Instead, the untimeliness of the postmodern gives way to a model of time, history and change that stresses 'implication' (or 'entanglement' – a key concept of contemporary posthumanism). The postmodern is seen to 'inhabit' the modern; it is always already contained in the modern which it thus anticipates:

[T]he postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity, modern temporality, comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself. And not only to exceed itself in that way, but to revolve itself into a sort of ultimate stability, such for example as is aimed at by the utopian project, but also by the straightforward political project implied in the grand narratives of emancipation. Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity.<sup>12</sup>

The relation between the modern and the postmodern is therefore not chronological, but it relies on a particular understanding of repetition or remembering. It is in this sense that postmodernism understands itself as a re-writing of modernity, neither as a break nor as a simple succession, but as a working through (in the psychoanalytic sense) that occurs at once forwards and backwards ‘without finality’.<sup>13</sup> This movement of back and forth within the process of ‘mourning’ the initial forgetting of the unrepresentable (modern) is what Lyotard refers to as anamnesis.<sup>14</sup>

The initial forgetting is the foreclosed or repressed origin of the modern (i.e. what needed to be repressed so that we could think of ourselves as ‘modern’). Against the modern ideology of the new, postmodernism sets its feeling of belatedness and parodic repetition in order to achieve a ‘stalling’ of the continual process of anticipating and appropriating, often related to the economic practices of late modern capitalism and consumer society. Critical of the omnipotence of the ‘system’ (modernity, capitalism, the media etc.), postmodern literature and art therefore often invoke the unsayable and unexpressible sublime and the radical otherness of the event in its radical futurity without any anticipation, as pure happening or performance. Coming at once too late and too soon — the phrase ‘this will have been new’ — reflects the temporal contradiction within the postmodern as a process of anamnesis: the future as already contained in the past and vice versa. Postmodernism believes that it is only in the performativity of (re-)writing (by creating its own rules) that an opening towards the future event is created.<sup>15</sup>

The artist and the writer therefore work without rules, and in order to establish the rules for what *will have been made*. This is why the work and the text can take on the properties of an event; it is also why they would arrive too late for their author or, in what amounts to the same thing, why their creation would always begin too soon. *Postmodern* would be understanding according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).<sup>16</sup>

The postmodern waiting for the absolute arrival or the Event is thus time gained for alternative histories to occur.<sup>17</sup>

So, postmodernist literature, criticism and theory – one of the main characteristics of the ‘postmodern’ is that these three discourses can no longer be distinguished – often gives the impression that it is a kind of waiting for an impossible event (the ‘new’ or unexpected other), while writing goes on and endlessly produces fiction, which writes about the (im)possibility of writing the event. There is a kind of performativity and circularity, sometimes even an apocalypticism that seeks to invoke, conjure up and somehow express the ineffable. This is also the reason why intertextuality, or the notion of the ‘intertext,’ can be seen as one of the central presuppositions of many postmodernist theories. Every text is not only an open system but is also never identical to itself. It is part of a system of textual relations, a form of generalized textuality which alone guarantees the ‘readability’ of our cultural universe. Thus intertextuality is the very condition of perceiving social reality and has thus quasi-ontological status, which explains the

proliferation narratives about narratives and the fragmentation and loss, the dissemination of identities and the critique of the 'unified self' in postmodernist writing. In a textual world, intertextuality is the only form of social relation with either the present or the past (history must be understood as layers of textuality). Metafictionality, in a textual world where every fiction is only another text, becomes virtually interchangeable with intertextuality. As Patricia Waugh explains, metafiction is 'a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text'.<sup>18</sup>

In postmodernist fiction, both metafictionality and intertextuality are employed to demonstrate the constructed (or fictional) nature of human reality. In so doing, postmodernist metafiction serves an important 'pedagogical' purpose in helping to understand contemporary ideas about reality – which can take a variety of negative and positive reactions: from experiencing the idea of general textuality as a 'prisonhouse of language' to the 'new forms of the fantastic, fabulatory extravaganzas' in magic realism (Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, Clive Sinclair, Graham Swift, D.M. Thomas, John Irving'.<sup>19</sup> The generalized notion of textuality thus often leads to a celebration of the power of fiction and fictionalization seen as equivalent to a reality- or world-building process. Some of the most frequent framing devices to be found in postmodernist metafiction thus include 'stories within stories, characters reading about their own fictional lives, self-consuming worlds or mutually contradictory situations, Chinese-box structures, which contest the reality of each individual "box" through a nesting of narrators, "fictions of infinity," confusion of ontological levels, through the incorporation of visions, dreams, hallucinatory states and pictorial representations which are finally indistinct from the apparently "real," thus reaching the conclusion that there 'is ultimately no distinction between "framed" and "unframed." There are only levels of form. There is ultimately only content perhaps, but it will never be discovered in a "natural" unframed state'.<sup>20</sup>

This is also the reason why postmodernist metafictional novels often display a (meta)linguistic awareness and linguistic playfulness. Metafiction draws attention to the process of 'recontextualisation' that occurs when language is used aesthetically, so that their embraced conception of reality tends towards one of what Waugh calls the two 'poles of metafiction,' 'one that finally accepts a substantial real world whose significance is not entirely composed of relationships within language; and one that suggests there can never be an escape from the prisonhouse of language and either delights or despairs in this. The first sort employs *structural* undermining of convention, or parody, using a specific previous text or system for its base (novelists like Fowles, Spark, Vonnegut, Lessing) because language is so pre-eminently the instrument which maintains the everyday. The second is represented by those writers who conduct their fictional experiments even at the level of the *sign* (like Barthelme, Brautigan, Ishmael Reed, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) and therefore fundamentally disturb the "everyday".<sup>21</sup> Either they constitute a 'parody' (or rather, the whole world is a parody), or they are predominantly 'metafictional at the level of the signifier.' One could say that it is the importance attributed to language as the only access to reality which assumes a crucial role in the reception of postmodernist fiction, criticism and theory.

## *Alternative Histories*

From a historical point of view (i.e. by 'historicizing postmodernism and the postmodern'), what has been happening in this 'meantime' (esp. the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) is a writing-on after the supposed end of (hi)story, which Fredric Jameson famously associated with the idea that postmodernism's extreme self-reflexivity rather than providing any political resistance or critique was in fact playing out the 'logic of late capitalism'.<sup>22</sup> So, how to 'exit' modernity and postmodernism's endless critique of it?

It is clear that the 'Great Narrative' of History — 'the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears in the dark' (*Waterland* 62), the inescapable and self-reproducing cycle of (inter)textuality — is the bait for man, the 'story-telling animal'. But it is equally clear that 'Reality' lies in the Here and Now, which, however, remains inexpressible, for it is outside the story-telling and beyond (inter)textuality. Between these fragmentary moments of 'Messianic time',<sup>23</sup> which repeatedly crush the individual under their intensified feelings of joy or terror and 'announce that time has taken us prisoner' (*Waterland* 61), is only the Void. This void between moments of Reality, which are the moments of true revolution, has to be filled; and this is done by telling stories. The problem is that these surprise attacks of the Here and Now only become accessible *après coup*, that is, through remembering. And what else is memory than a story. So it happens that by the very attempt to arrest history in the here and now, it is necessary to tell the story of an end as a never-ending story.

The endless repetition of the same, however, must be resisted. History as the endless war of humanity against itself (after the war is only before the next war) must end. But how to stop a cycle on which one's own being and even one's thinking is dependent? How to stop telling stories? How to escape into the absolute Alterity of Un-History? History can only come to an end after the 'death of man', the annihilation of the subject, but who would live to see it?<sup>24</sup> By thus invoking the arrival of this absolute alterity of an other history, writing becomes 'performative' so to speak. Writing becomes writing about the end of writing, about its own exhaustion,<sup>25</sup> or its (impossible) abstention while waiting for the Event which would transcend all writing.

Pluralisation is one option to escape this conundrum – there is not one (universal) history, but only histories in the plural (or 'chronodiversity'). With its pluralist ideals, postmodernism is radically opposed to universalist historiography, because historical discourse always depends on the exclusion of its silent others.<sup>26</sup> This is why the time of the postmodern coincides with a turn towards other histories: alternative, oppositional and repressed histories. To preserve the futurity of the event as the experience of the other, and as the possibility of history, change and justice in the future, involves an 'affirmative experience of the coming of the other as other'.<sup>27</sup> This is not in opposition to modernity, or a rejection of the past as inheritance or tradition; rather it is an affirmation of memory as essential for the process of working through the modern. For Jacques Derrida the un(re)presentable moment of non-contemporaneity of the present with itself (or Swift's slippery 'Here and Now') opens up the historical possibility for the very idea of justice, and it also makes the process of history possible, establishing a new relation with repetition and deferral.<sup>28</sup> But this historical moment cannot be thought of as unity or oneness; it is always 'more-than-one', neither 'here' nor 'there' (nor 'now'), like a ghost that inhabits the untimely, always escaping the present moment. What therefore comes 'after history,' is the return of this ghost; and postmodernist literature, criticism and theory must therefore specialise in what Derrida calls 'hauntology' (or, the ontology of the spectre or the spectral):

Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost... Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*... How to *comprehend* in fact the discourse of the end or the discourse about the end?... After the end of history, the spirit comes by *coming back* [*revenant*], it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again.<sup>29</sup>

Repetition starts with the return of a ghost (*revenant*, literally 'one who returns'), by a feeling of *déjà vu*; and it is in the difference created by repetition that the singularity of the event can be perceived as an echo or trace. The discourse of the end of history is itself belated and of course only announces the end of a certain concept of (the end of) history. In the promise of the end of a certain history the final becoming historical of history is thus merely announced.

It is thus only by embracing the problem of repetition that postmodernism can dissolve the teleology of the modern. For repetition involves difference, which is to say a foothold for critical distance: a transgression of mere repetition, which can be appropriated by parody or irony.<sup>30</sup> Repetition is also the very condition of knowledge, according to Gilles Deleuze, who reverses Freud's idea of the compulsion to repeat: it is not because one forgets/represses that one is forced to repeat or that the repressed returns, but it is because one repeats that one forgets. Repetition in this sense is a selection in which only difference returns while the same is eliminated during this process of selection. Only by affirming the process of repetition does one gain access to what is different. The logic of the psychoanalytic cure with its transference processes is based on this idea of repetition of the different and of a recognition *après coup* (namely by the doubling of the occurrence). Paradoxically, history can thus only be articulated in the future, and within the process of this articulation, a reorganisation of the past and the future can occur. By transference the past becomes the present so that the future can once more be an open question.

Repetition and trauma in a sense mutually create each other, so that memory can alter past events *après coup* by transforming the repressed into traumatic post-eventness. The symbolic process that takes place during the analysis expresses the anachronistic paradox of *Nachträglichkeit* in the future perfect: this will have been 'it'. Thus, paradoxically, one has to travel into the future to encounter the repressed (the past):

From where does the repressed return? (...) From the future. Symptoms are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively — the analysis produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning. As soon as we enter the symbolic order, the past is always present in the form of historical tradition and the meaning of these traces is not given; it changes continually with the transformations of the signifier's network. Every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way.<sup>31</sup>

The cure works because knowledge is presupposed in the other (the subject-supposed-to-know), by which the subject hopes to gain insight into his/her own meaning. This knowledge is a necessary illusion (for the other, in fact, 'lacks' it) until one finds out and

constitutes it oneself *après coup*. The journey into the past, the historical enquiry can only occur on the symbolic level of the signifier, and only in language (or writing) can one know and bring about the past:

This, therefore, is the basic paradox we are aiming at: the subject is confronted with a scene from the past that he wants to change, to meddle with, to intervene in; he takes a journey into the past, intervenes in the scene, and it is not that he 'cannot change anything' — quite the contrary, only through his intervention does the scene from the past *become what it always was*: his intervention was from the beginning comprised, included. The initial 'illusion' of the subject consists in simply forgetting to include in the scene his own act...<sup>32</sup>

This describes the form of historical repetition that gives rise to historicism as self-fulfilling prophecy. The subject necessarily overlooks his or her blind spot, in the way his or her acting is already part of the state of things he or she is looking at, the way his or her error is part of the truth itself. Truth arises from this misrecognition, by a change of the symbolic status of the event; repetition recreates the traumatic event as symbolic necessity *post factum*. It is a retroactive justification through repetition as interpretation, but there seems to be no short cut to the processes of truth-finding than through this form of misrecognition and repetition.

And this is precisely the point at which I would like to move, 'forward' (but nothing is more certain), namely to the idea of the...

#### *Posthuman (or, one post can hide another)*

Everything that was said about the post in connection with the postmodern applies in principle to all postisms, including the 'latest' ones: posthuman, posthumanism and posthumanisation. Obviously, the stakes in post-human-ism have been raised again and hence the sense of urgency of the ending invoked here usually has the effect that in engaging with the posthuman we tend to have even less time for the quite intricate logical and conceptual 'side-effects' the posting process inevitably brings with it. Instead, there is now often exasperation with the postmodern or the impression of being stuck in a time-loop, something we can seemingly ill afford in a time when 'we' are increasingly overtaken by 'events'. These events and their eventness — one of the main issues for postmodernist literature, criticism and theory as outlined above — are usually associated, on the one hand, with technology (digitalization, virtualization, prosthesisation, medicalization...), and, on the other hand, with extinction scenarios and thus with ecology.<sup>33</sup> Rosi Braidotti's book on the posthuman captures this current attitude very well:

While conservative, religious social forces today often labour to re-inscribe the human within a paradigm of natural law, the concept of the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns. After the postmodern, the post-colonial, the post-industrial, the post-communist and even the much contested post-feminist, we seem to have entered the post-human predicament. Far from being the nth version in a sequence of prefixes that may appear both endless and arbitrary, the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of

common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet.<sup>34</sup>

Admittedly, anything that 'posts' the human is raising the stakes much higher than the postmodern, but even something as drastic as the posthuman (the 'figure') and posthumanism (the 'discourse')<sup>35</sup> is subject to the temporal logic of the 'post', maybe even more so. It is in this sense that posthumanism or the posthuman cannot just be understood as the follow-on, the supersession or the 'outcome' of the postmodern and postmodernism. Instead they should be seen as co-implicated and entangled in their respective critiques of humanism. One simply cannot post one postism with another one – one just accumulates ghosts and increases the haunting.

The exasperation with the apparent immobilism of the postmodern in the face of the apparent (technological) acceleration of the posthuman is understandable, but should also be regarded with skepticism. In contemporary literature and criticism this is often expressed in a desire for a 'return', a 'reconstruction' or 'healing' in what is more and more frequently called the 'post-postmodern' generation of writers (frequently named are David Foster Wallace, J. Toni Morrison, Jonathan Safran Foer, Mark Z. Danielewski, Michael Chabon, and David Mitchell).<sup>36</sup> It is, however, no coincidence that in the face of the 'posthuman' (with its technological, economic and ecological threats) the discourse on the contemporary 'reconstruction of the human' in literature, criticism and (some) theory arises. It should rather be understood as a symptom of a desire that seeks to detach itself from postmodern antihumanism (the critique of the unified self) precisely at the time when this critique has in fact become the new 'reality'. With their insistence on existential or ontological plurality, the fragmentation of identity and a breaking up of aesthetic norms, the breaking up of narrative continuity and teleology, many postmodern texts are thus, one could argue, more radically 'posthumanist' than their current successors.

Let me therefore, since, in times of turns and returns, memories tend to be selective, recall another, final, aspect of the postmodern that might be necessary to caution against the ambient desire to embrace posthumanism as a form of reconstruction or 'rehumanisation': Postmodernism has also been that time and that style that is most urgently concerned not only with the survival of humanity but also with the future of literature. The famous mixing of 'high' and 'low' (elite and popular) culture, the commentary on and the incorporation of other media ('intermediality') and science into the novel, the gradual embracing of hypertext and the advent of electronic literature – all become topics of storytelling at an increasingly self-conscious level, so that the figure of the posthuman (in all its guises) is the almost natural 'step' for narrative fiction. However, it might also be a step too far for literature in the sense that from a media history point of view, established literary practices and genres might no longer be able to 'compete' with new media and virtual reality technology and might therefore be no longer at the forefront of cultural change. Posthumanist literature might thus be a contradiction in terms. So be careful what you wish for...

In the meantime, however, let me tell you one last story, namely of the...

### *Future of Literature*

In good old literary humanist fashion, and befitting the mindset of a (late) literary scholar, the final word should go (as ever) to literature – literature as that discourse which arguably has the privilege of being purely speculative and thus being able to say 'anything'.<sup>37</sup> Let me give the last word to the history man, Tom Crick and outline the

questions a *critical* posthumanism, mindful of the temporalities at work in any present, might be able to raise:

Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man – let me offer you a definition – is the story-telling animal. (*Waterland*, 62)

We know that we will have to tell stories differently from now on – neither animality nor nature justify human exceptionalism. ‘We’ are no longer alone and we never were, of course. In fact, we are no longer ‘we’. What remains of humanism is a certain yearning that continues to be the target of a *critical* posthumanism, by which I mean an ongoing deconstruction of humanism that extends both to the constructions of the past and of the future, the always already and the never yet, with all the thinkable shadings in between, to preserve: let’s call it a kind of ‘care’, not for the self, but for the ‘other’ – the other human, or maybe Lyotard’s ‘inhuman’, that might or might not make us human. I can hear this, nostalgic, slightly ‘tragic’, yearning in moving passages like these:

Children, be curious. Nothing is worse (I know it) than when curiosity stops. Nothing is more repressive than the repression of curiosity. Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world. It’s part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit. People die when curiosity goes. People have to find out, people have to know. How can there be any true revolution till we know what we’re made of? (*Waterland*, 206)

The question is, since we now seem to know that there won’t be a revolution: should we preserve this human(ist) ‘curiosity’? And can we ever trust this desire, this yearning, to find out ‘what we’re made of’? In the end, in reevaluating and historicizing the postmodern and its critique of modernity, humanism and ‘Western’ metaphysics, and in the face of the impatience of the posthuman, a critical posthumanism, whose task is the ‘rewriting humanity’, needs to be aware of the complex temporalities opened up by the ‘time of the posts’ and remember that we haven’t finished with the human yet, and that we’re far from ready to ‘move on’.

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Swift, *Waterland*, London : Picador, 1991, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, London: Turnaround, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Linda Hutcheon’s famous characterization of postmodernist writing as ‘historiographic metafiction’, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, Oxford: OUP, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> *Waterland*, dir. Stephen Gyllenhaal, dvd, Optimum Home Entertainment, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time*, Princeton: PUP, 1992, 3-18.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus : Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik*, Frankfurt : Suhrkamp, 1989, 292.

<sup>9</sup> Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus* 277.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?’, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, 22.

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- <sup>11</sup> Lyotard, 'Rewriting Modernity', *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, 24-25.
- <sup>12</sup> Lyotard, 'Rewriting Modernity', 25.
- <sup>13</sup> See Lyotard, 'Rewriting Modernity', 24, and 30.
- <sup>14</sup> Lyotard, 'Note on the meaning of "post-"', *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, 93.
- <sup>15</sup> See David Wood, 'Introduction: Editing the Future', *Writing the Future*, ed. Wood, London: Routledge, 1990, 1 ff.
- <sup>16</sup> Lyotard, 'Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?', 24.
- <sup>17</sup> For many, this Event finally arrived on September 11 2001, but that is another story...
- <sup>18</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London: Methuen, 1984, 2.
- <sup>19</sup> Waugh, *Metafiction*, 9.
- <sup>20</sup> Waugh, *Metafiction*, 31.
- <sup>21</sup> Waugh, *Metafiction*, 53.
- <sup>22</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991.
- <sup>23</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, London: Fontana: 1973.
- <sup>24</sup> This is one of the main paradoxes of the proliferating 'World-Without-Us' scenarios and one of the main symptoms of posthumanism, understood as postanthropocentrism. See e.g. Matthew Taylor, *Universes Without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- <sup>25</sup> Cf. John Barth, *The Literature of Exhaustion and The Literature of Replenishment*, Northridge, Ca.: Lord John Press, 1982.
- <sup>26</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. T. Conley, New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- <sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Destruction of Actuality: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', *Radical Philosophy* 68 (Autumn 1994): 36.
- <sup>28</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, intro. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, New York and London: Routledge, 1994.
- <sup>29</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 10.
- <sup>30</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, London: Athlone Press, 1994, 5.
- <sup>31</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, 55-56.
- <sup>32</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 57-58.
- <sup>33</sup> For a good summary of the implications of this argument and its relation to the notion of the 'anthropocene' see Claire Colebrook's 'Introduction: Framing the End of the Species', in her edited volume *Extinction*, available at: <http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Extinction>
- <sup>34</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity, 1-2.
- <sup>35</sup> Please allow me to refer to my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- <sup>36</sup> Cf. in particular Noline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010; Kim L. Worthington, *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996; and Irmtraud Huber, *Literature after Postmodernism*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- <sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, "'The Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida', *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, London: Routledge, 1992, 33-75.

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