Solidarities with the Non/Human or, Literature and Its Afterlives

Collected Essays on Critical Posthumanism, Volume 2

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Introduction: Critical Posthumanism and Literature

> In years to come, the novels that matter will, I believe, be those seen as having prepared us for an epistemic shift in how we imagine ourselves as human beings.[1]
>
> The history of the human has led us to a situation in which the human itself can only be contemplated from elsewhere, from some posthuman perspective.[2]

There is no Posthumanist Literature

> After a 2015 conference speech entitled "Posthumanist Literature?" Stefan Herbrechter, author of several articles and monographs on posthumanism and the posthuman, was asked to name a novel that was, according to him, posthuman. He answered that he had not found any *posthumanist* literature yet, that "it would be literature written by stones […] or based on animal traces".[3]

Guilty as charged, but let me explain… and provide, first of all, some more context for this claim. Originally I raised this question – Is there something like 'posthumanist literature'? – in the context of a reading of Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and *Zero K*.[4] The phrase, 'posthumanist literature', I proposed, might well turn out to be a contradiction in terms, if one starts by differentiating between posthumanism, the posthuman and posthumanisation, on the one hand, and literature, the literary and the post-literary (or the question of the 'survival' of literature), on the other hand. This conceptual framework leads to a further differentiation, namely between that of a 'literature of the posthuman' and 'posthumanist literature'. Looking at contemporary examples, one notices that literature engages with posthumanism (understood as a discourse) and the posthuman (understood as a figure) in a number of ways. Thematically, a literature of the posthuman is concerned with a variety of topics that are associated with figurations of the posthuman, for example, climate change, AI, androids and robots, the Anthropocene, enhancement, postanthropocentrism, the question of the 'animal', object ontology, cyborgisation, dis/embodiment, technological enhancement, non/human futures, to name just the most obvious. Conceptually, however, a posthumanist literature implies a level of postanthropocentric (self-)reflexion that necessarily problematises the very idea of the 'literary' as a practice and of 'literature' as one of the most central humanist institutions. Maybe the most obvious, pragmatic, question that arises from such a stylistic challenge of posthumanist literature understood as no longer written by and addressed to humans would be: who might be the addressee of such 'nonhuman fiction'?

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[1] Nancy Armstrong, "The Future of the Novel", *Novel* 44.1: 8.

[2] Peter Boxall, "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman", in: James, David, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 127.

[3] Carole Guesse, "On the Possibility of a Posthuman/ist Literature(s)", in: Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis, eds., *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 23-40; original emphasis.

[4] Published as Stefan Herbrechter, "Posthuman/ist Literature? Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and *Zero K*", *Open Library of the Humanities* 6.2 (2020): 1-25; available online at: https://olh.openlibhums.org/articles/10.16995/olh.592/ (accessed 18/12/2023), and reproduced in an updated version as chapter 13 of this volume.

The *critical* posthumanist approach I outlined in my reading of DeLillo's late fiction(cf. below), and which I am advocating in all the readings collected in this volume, might serve as an example of reading contemporary literature through a 'diffraction' of the posthuman and posthumanism. Does that mean that Don DeLillo is a posthumanist writer? Probably not, but his work, especially his more recent novels (from *Underworld* onwards) have been reflecting themes that are often associated with posthumanism: digitalisation, embodiment, globalisation, terrorism, artificial intelligence and climate change. In *Zero K*, DeLillo specifically and critically engages with what *he* calls 'posthumanism'. However, the ideology that pushes Ross Lockhart, one of the main characters in *Zero K*, towards investing into future (cryogenic) technology sounds more like *trans*humanist extropianism: "We want to stretch the boundaries of what it means to be human – stretch and then surpass. We want to do whatever we are capable of doing in order to alter human thought and bend the energies of civilization".[5]

Critical posthumanism reading DeLillo (and other such writing) therefore needs to track the tension between this 'transhumanist' incarnation of the posthuman in DeLillo's novel and articulate its context, namely the underlying process of posthumanisation that may be seen at work in the changing role of media – or what one might call the 'digital turn' in DeLillo's media ontology – which, in turn, leads to the question of literature and its 'survival' under these conditions.

Paul Sheehan was right in responding to this tension that inhabits literature that engages with the posthuman by asking:

> Is [the posthuman] a utopian aspiration, a cautionary critique, an evolutionary end-point? Is the posthuman era upon us, or must it remain a permanent possibility, forever just out of reach?[6]

'Posthumanist literature' probably raises reader expectations of (science) fictional[7] accounts that deal with the proliferation of 'posthuman bodies' (from androids and cyborgs to clones and zombies) and literary reactions to "the specifically technological outcomes of thinking through and beyond the human" and "human perfectibility".[8] In fact, the 'posthumanisation' of the body (an idea closely connected to age-old myths of human-god, human-animal, human-plant, human-machine etc. hybridity), is only one interest, albeit an important one, in contemporary literature informed by "a posthuman becoming of unlimited desire".[9] There are other equally important questions explored by contemporary fiction than issues raised by 'technological posthumanism', with its history and its future of mutant or mutating, cloned techno-bodies and their emergent informational 'dematerialisation' and mediatisation. That does not mean of course that Paul Sheehan is wrong in seeing a parallel between the novel with its contemporary 'post-generic' plasticity and the transformative potential of posthuman bodies (he identifies four current forms of posthuman bodies as "post-generic archetypes" appearing in contemporary fiction: the cybernetic body (e.g. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*), the cloned body (*Never Let Me Go*), the cannibal body (*The Road*) and the zombie body (*Zone One*)).

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[5] Don DeLillo, *Zero K* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), p. 71.

[6] Paul Sheehan, "Posthuman Bodies", in: David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 245.

[7] One characteristic of 'posthumanisation' is precisely that science fiction and science fact are no longer so easy to distinguish. Hence my suggestion to use the phrase 'science faction' to describe the erosion of this particular humanist and Enlightenment value in my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), *passim*.

[8] Sheehan, "Posthuman Bodies", p. 245.

[9] *Ibid*.

Peter Boxall arguably provides the most detailed, but also a much more ambivalent, engagement with the question of how contemporary literature engages with and is affected by issues related to posthumanism and posthumanisation. In his analysis of the role of science and technology in British fiction since 1945 he argues: "It is one of the peculiar contradictions of modernity that the technology that extends the reach of the human, that helps humans to master their environment, also works to weaken the human itself as a category".[10] This "peculiar dialectic" finds its "logical conclusion" in the "current environmental crisis that threatens our planet" as a sign that the "technology that has allowed humankind to control the planet has also made it inhospitable to humans, and to all other species", Boxall continues.[11] The double-edged sword of technological extension (and originary technicity) of humans is what Boxall traces as the fundamental built-in "posthuman logic" which means that "technology amplifies the human only to the extent that it dwarfs it";[12] this logic, as Boxall argues, testifies to the "emergence of a posthuman structure of feeling at work in the British fiction [one might extend this at least to 'Anglo-American' fiction and, arguably, beyond] of the postwar":

> The development of the novel in the period [since 1945] is arguably characterised by the lapsing of the human as the dominant figure for civilised life, and the emergence of a posthuman rhetoric and aesthetic, which shares much with the other postal compounds that shape cultural life in the later decades of the century – such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and so on.[13]

By entering a phase of accelerated technological transformation the choice the novel offers seems to lie between a resistance to or a defense of the natural body, as well as the embrace or even the acceleration of a "postnatural body" (i.e. a tension or "splitting between a residual, natural human and a technologically produced posthuman").[14] On the basis of this postwar aesthetics, Boxall develops what he calls a "posthuman wave" model for the contemporary novel. The postwar period of "mutedly experimental realism" (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*) sees the

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[10] Peter Boxall, "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman", p. 127.

[11] *Ibid*.

[12] Cf. also Günther Anders's notions of 'Promethean shame' and machine envy in his *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vols. 1 and 2 *(*München: C.H Beck, 1956 and 1980), and the partial translation and commentary by Christopher Müller in *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

[13] Peter Boxall, "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman", p. 130.

[14] *Ibid*., p. 131.

"emergence of a second wave (…) of the posthumanist postwar novel – a wave that begins with the emergence of a new generation of writers in the early 1970s"[15] writing against the backdrop of a mediated and surveilled "global public sphere (…) in which the very possibility of interiority has given way before an administered and mechanised world state" (Beckett's *The Lost Ones*; Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*).[16] This global surveillance technology "turns the human inside out, ejecting us into a totalising space of automation".[17] According to Boxall, therefore:

> It is this assertion of a new reality – a new kind of posthuman accommodation of personal space and built space, framed by the speed and violence of the image – that opens onto a new wave in the production of the posthuman.[18]

The explosion of "a sense of interiority of the consciousness is what produces an entirely new aesthetics and politics"[19] and leads to a generation of writers who seek to dispense with the category of the human altogether (e.g. Carter, Winterson, Barnes, Rushdie, Ishiguro):

> If being is made out of its extensions as image, as electronic code, as machine or clone, then there is no longer any tension between some notion of proper natural being and such being as it is brought into the media sphere. By recognising that "people are made of image", we allow for a kind of free interchange between interior and exterior landscapes that has been denied us throughout our histories. Indeed, it is perhaps such denial – the policing and blocking of interchanges between the inside and outside of being – that has constituted the human; the sense of liberation that late-twentieth-century posthumanism brought with it arose from the perception that this denial was finally being overcome.[20]

However, this second 'triumphalist' wave of posthumanism in the postwar novel is currently, "in the first decades of the twenty-first century", being superseded by a third wave, which is concerned with the realisation that "environmental disaster is the greatest threat facing our planet, and the connected realisation that the political sphere, in which human and posthuman interaction takes place, has a connection to a material environment, one which cannot be simply dissolved, which cannot be reduced to the condition of specularity, or to an effect of discourse".[21] Boxall's prime example of such a "new (material) realism" beyond the representationalism and constructivism is Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2006), which Boxall sees as emblematic of the "remainder that is not captured in language, in the image".[22] The greatest challenge for the novel is thus to find "a new accommodation with matter" through "a new kind of writing that might give expression to a kind of posthuman materialism, a kind of writing that might be equal to the challenge of describing our transformed relations with the world, without reverting to exploded conceptions of the sovereign human".[23]

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[15] *Ibid.*, p. 134.

[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 136.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

[19] *Ibid*.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 139.

[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Interestingly, in his *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, Boxall had developed a slightly different approach, privileging the "shift from the kinetic speed of the motor vehicle to the electronic speed of digital information exchange" and the idea of a "world community of writers", which, in "the novel today" expresses its contemporaneity with this transformed world. Among the usual suspects of Anglophone and 'world' fiction we also find, of course, Don DeLillo.[24] Globalisation and digitalisation could thus be said to form the 'base' to the posthuman(ist) 'superstructure' which the contemporary 'international' novel reflects "in the wake of the decline of national sovereignty, and with the development of a new set of cultural and technological protocols for the organisation of space and time" and which reflects a "new sense of the intractable contradictions between the local and the international, and the stubborn persistence of the forms of locally embedded material being, that refuse to be eroded by the arrival of a liquid capitalism".[25] What Boxall therefore traces in the sensibility of contemporary novelists is a "profound disjunction between our real, material environments and the new technological, political and aesthetic forms in which our global relations are being conducted",[26] which in fact turns posthumanism (as a discourse) into the ideological battleground of an underlying political, economic, technological etc. process (posthumanisation), as I have been arguing. It is the nature of the (critical) relationship between posthumanism and posthumanisation that provokes the ambient return of realism and the desire to "grasp the texture of the contemporary real", according to Boxall:

> There is, in the fiction of the new century, as well as in the very wide range of other disciplines and intellectual networks, a strikingly new attention to the nature of our reality – its materiality, its relation to touch, to narrative and to visuality (…) one can see the emergence of new kinds of realism, a new set of formal mechanisms with which to capture the real, as it offers itself as the material substrate of our being in the world.[27]

Closely related to this turn towards a new 'speculative' realism is the realisation of a "deep and far-reaching crisis in our understanding of the limits of the human" and a "fascination with the shifting boundary between the human and the nonhuman, and with the ethical, political and cultural challenges that such transformations represent".[28] In this context, "the contemporary novel offers a striking picture of the estranged material conditions of posthuman embodiment in the new century, while also reaching for new ways of encoding such being, new ways of thinking the ethics and poetics of species being, after the breaching of the limits of the human".[29]

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[23] *Ibid*., p. 140.

[24] Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First –Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 4-6.

[25] *Ibid*., p. 8.

[26] *Ibid*:, p. 9.

[27] *Ibid*., p. 10.

[28] *Ibid*., pp. 12-13.

[29] *Ibid*., p. 13.

Despite this detailed focus on the role posthumanism and the posthuman play in the contemporary novel, Boxall is wise not to commit to a label like ‘posthumanist literature’ as such, for the reasons I pointed out at the beginning. To illustrate this further, let me return once more to Carole Guesse’s implied criticism cited in the epigraph above, where she takes issue with my claim that not only is there no *posthuman* literature (what would that be? Literature written by and, even more absurdly, *for* posthumans?), but also, arguably, no *posthumanist* literature (given that literature is such a fundamentally humanist institution). She writes:

> While Herbrechter (…) considers posthuman literature as purely thematic – the posthuman only being able to influence (…) the factor of the *story* – he apprehends posthumanist literature according to several factors – *language*, *context*, and *book* – but eventually acknowledges the impossibility for the concept to exist. His understanding of posthumanism implies that the human cannot play any part in the process of creating posthumanist literature, which turns this concept into a theoretical dead-end based on an apparently unsolvable contradiction.[30]

I would like to reiterate and insist on the claims at issue here by adding that even though the inherent contradiction within the phrase ‘posthumanist literature’ might indeed be unsolvable, this is in no way a “dead end”. It is a dead end only if looked at purely from the point of view of the institution of literature. In fact, from the point of view of literary criticism and literary theory, both discourses that are not literature themselves but ‘parasitical’ (in the positive, Derridean sense) of it, the apparent dead end becomes an interesting feature. What underlies my original claim was almost too obvious, I expect: as long as literature is produced by human authors (even if these authors are increasingly ‘simulated’ and ‘replaced’ by AI), and moreover is evidently produced for human readers, it remains an anthropocentric institution even if it increasingly explores the limits of both the human and its own implication in a humanist drive to re-anthropo-centre the human. The simple fact that a novel might be written by a posthuman AI will not make it posthuman as such regardless whether its human readers know or do not know that they are reading a piece of literature or fiction that has not been produced by a human (but a ‘posthuman’ who, nevertheless, still ‘impersonates’ a human form of writing agency, produces human language and speaks to human concerns). It is also not an example of posthumanist literature, as long as it uses and, in doing so, reconfirms the established channels, reflexes, expectations and models of distribution of literature’s humanist ‘protocols’ (characters, narrative, genre, books, ebooks, serials and so on). If one took the idea of a ‘posthumanist literature’ seriously, or literally, on the other hand, it would be something unrecognisable, even more unrecognisable than Roland Barthes’s idea of a “*texte recevable*” (as opposed to a “*texte scritpible*” and a “*texte lisible*”), to return to a widely discussed poststructuralist challenge to the institution of literature and its humanism from a 1970s ‘anti-humanist’ perspective.[31] What separates our moment from that of the poststructuralist discussion of the ‘end of literature’ is precisely that literature even in its most imaginable experimentalist and intermedial forms does not make any sense without human readers and their humanist reading habits, expectations and embodied reflexes. How else explain the mostly underwhelming reading experiences of 'electronic literature' unless these are ultimately remapped onto the very idea of and challenge to the question of 'what it means to be human'? This is still the case, even if, "meaning production can be co-dependent on the reader and the machine, a nonhuman entity",[32] simply because reading is always based on a co-dependence of a human and a technological element, whether that element be machine-produced or not.

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[30] Guesse, “On the Possibility of Posthuman/ist Literature(s)”, p. 27.

[31] For the distinction between ‘receivable’, ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ texts see Roland Barthes, *S/Z* [1973] (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) and my discussion in *Lawrence Durrell, Postmodernism and the Ethics of Alterity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 16-57 (chapter 2).

Let me therefore shift the discussion towards a different discursive level: one that focuses on the aspect of the *critical* in 'critical posthumanism'. The 'critical' in this phrase signals a critique of posthumanism (a discourse that is itself critical of another discourse, namely 'humanism', but which of course also harbours many 'internal' contradictions and limitations) and at the same time evokes the idea of a posthumanist criticism – which seems much less contradictory than the idea of a 'posthumanist literature'. Even though posthumanist criticism, or posthumanist (critical) theory more generally, is equally addressed to human reading subjects of course, its aim is to 'assist' humans and their literature (or cultural production more generally) in making visible their humanist preconceptions and closures through what Ivan Callus and myself have called 'posthumanist readings'.[33] Before I return to the notion of what such a posthumanst reading entails let me so to speak clear the air a little and rearticulate my idea of the (problematic) relationship between literature and posthumanism.

There is currently only one introductory study on posthumanism that is specifically written from the point of view of literary studies[34] (although others are undoubtedly being written). I do not think that this is either a coincidence or due to some neglect or conservativism on behalf of literary scholars. It rather has something to do with the distinction between 'posthuman' and 'posthumanist', or 'the posthuman' (basically a (rhetorical) figure) and 'posthumanism' (a discourse or 'style').[35] Defining the posthuman seems relatively straightforward: it is a matter of 'our' (cultural-technological) imaginary. Posthumanist, however, refers to a much more radical question: what to do with our innermost meaning-making (not to say hermeneutic, rhetorical and discursive) reflexes that direct our 'symbolic minds' towards a world that is seemingly 'ours' to make sense of (and the responsibility this implies – a responsibility that it would be more than hazardous to relinquish, at a time of ambient 'species angst' due to global terror, the persistence of wars and nuclear threats, climate change, resource depletion, biotechnology, a radical decline in biodiversity and radical technological change – all human-induced). *Critical* posthumanism is the attempt to think through various 'ends' of the human and its humanisms without shirking any of the persisting responsibilities, and to do so without techno-utopianism, but also without giving in to the ambient catastrophism.

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[32] Guesse, "On the Possibility of Posthuman/ist Literature(s)", p. 32.

[33] Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, "What is a posthumanist reading?", *Angelaki* 13.1 (2008): 95-111.

[34] See Pramod Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

[35] For more detail on this distinction between figure and discourse see my *Posthumanism – A Critical Analysis*.

In that context, the designation of 'posthumanist' implies a doubt whether literature, fiction, writing etc., as human and humanist practices, are fundamentally changing or already have changed. Or, in other words, the question critical posthumanism is putting to literature as the practice and institution concerned with fictional scenarios (and no longer quite preeminently so, in the so-called golden age of television, or in the context of digital games) is whether, today, in writing differently or otherwise 'we' are (or indeed should be) bringing about something like the 'posthuman'? What would really constitute 'posthuman' forms of writing? Forms of writing that either take place without humans, or writing that changes what it means to be human, or redefine what the human *is*? Is it enough to engage with rewritings of the human-animal boundary, the human-machine and subject-object distinction, the question of non/human agency and embodiment, as well as forms of human-environment entanglement to be able to claim that there is (or there promises to be an emerging) posthumanist literature?

Another way to approach this is by focusing on narrative and its futures – both the future of and as narrative. Maybe the ultimate dream of a posthumanist literature or a literature that fully engages with the posthuman condition lies in the "emergence of a posthuman narrative – a narrative that does not (…) feel a blurring of the self's boundaries as an existential crisis? A narrative that is at home with the larger-than-human scale? That doesn't embody the viewpoint of a human character", as Steve Tomasula suggested.[36] The 'ecological' benefits of such a 'posthumanist' narrative seem obvious. According to Dana Phillips the benefit for ecocriticism lies in its production of "narratives of collapse", as she explains:

> The chief advantage of posthumanism is that it enables us to put the onus of environmental caretaking where it belongs: squarely on the shoulders of those creatures that have managed, by sheer weight of numbers, and thanks both to their aggressive colonization of all but one of the continents and to their habitual clumsiness when they wield the tools that seem to set them apart from other animals, to make a fine mess of the planet where they dwell (…). Posthumanism may give us the distance from 'normality' that we need if we are to understand how we came to be in this awkward circumstance of creeping down the back stairs, and to figure out that and how much to make of those embarrassing, possibly lethal 'side-effects'.[37]

In this sense, the recent 'geological turn' with its concern of thinking and writing about, or narrating the Anthropocene, both retro- and prospectively, is caught between what Pieter Vermeulen identifies as two different narrative sensibilities. On the one hand, narrative can be seen as "fatally anthropocentric and out of sync with the nonhuman rhythms of the Anthropocene".[38] On the other hand, narrative continues to play an important role in "safeguarding human life and an awareness of a distinctive human agency and responsibility".[39] As a result, what one might call 'Anthropocene narratives' maybe all too temptingly, become acts of narration that involve "an imagined future memory",[40] or "the present that will become the past of a future [narrative] cannot prevent.[41] Vermeulen sees the figure and narrative of the "future geologist" as an "affective, even therapeutic reckoning with species finitude".[42] As a result, Anthropocene narratives are about "training us" in a different apprehension of human life.[43] The process of "depresentification" – which sees the present as primarily the object of a future memory – makes it possible to think and perceive as if our world would be readable in the absence of what we now take to be readers. It thus constitutes an exercise in abandoning human life to a geological gaze that is rigorously uninterested in understanding human exceptionality.[44] As tempting as it may be to seek some kind of consolation in the preservation of a proleptic memory of the fossilised, geologised human of the future, this affectivity of future-oriented melancholy is a sign of the 'vanishing human', i.e. the ideological self-effacement of humans that characterises 'our' late humanist obsession with 'our' own extinction. In that nihilistic and ultimately cynical sense the human threatens to remain 'exceptional' even in the apparent absence of exceptionalism. It seems that the human cannot imagine anything either before or after itself – which is exactly what the geological turn, and arguably the 'nonhuman turn' more generally, in posthumanism has helped to articulate and has begun to address.[45]

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[36] Steve Tomasula."Visualization, Scale, and the Emergence of Posthuman Narrative", *Sillages Critiques* 17 (2014): 13-14; available online at: http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/3562 (accessed 19/01/2024).

[37] Dana Phillips, "Posthumanism, Environmental History, and Narratives of Collapse", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 22.1 (2015): 66-67.

[38] Pieter Vermeulen, "Future Readers: Narrating the Human in the Anthropocene", *Textual Practice*, 31.5 (2017): 868.

Posthumanist Readings

> The 'longing for the human' as the driving force behind humanism's constant self-replication expresses itself through the variation produced by constant self-transformation. It recalls Nietzsche's most humanist expression in anti-humanist disguise: become who you (already) are![46]

As Guesse correctly points out, in our "What is a posthumanist reading?" we argued that "works that do not necessarily feature posthuman characters or issues might still provoke posthumanist readings".[47] This has both synchronic and diachronic implications for literary production and its critical reception.[48] It is true that in "What is a posthumanist reading?" we focus on the non-literary genre which is (Hollywood or blockbuster) science fiction movies – *Blade Runner*, *Terminator*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *X-Men*, *Minority Report*, *Gattaca*,

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[39] *Ibid*., p. 869.

[40] *Ibid*., p. 874.

[41] *Ibid*., p. 875.

[42] *Ibid*., p. 877.

[43] *Ibid*., p. 879.

[44] Cf. *Ibid*., p. 880.

[45] Cf. my *Before Humanity: Popsthumanism and Ancestrality* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), which takes this argument as its starting point.

[46] Herbrechter and Callus, "What is a posthumanist reading?", p. 105.

[47] Guesse, "On the Possibilty of Posthuman/ist Literature(s)", p. 28.

[48] As we have demonstrated in various volumes including *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Houndmills, Palgrave, 2012) and *Cy-Borges: Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009).

Planet of the Apes and *The Matrix* – and not their literary originals. However, I would contend, the argument is transferable, namely that "it is possible to read 'texts', in the widest sense attributed to this word by poststructuralism, through the way they set up a catalogue of assumptions and values about 'what it means to be human'".[49] Guesse is also right to point out, that in our focus on *readings* (i.e. we do not ask whether a certain text is or is not 'posthumanist' but whether one can read it from an angle that is 'posthumanist' in the sense that this reading forces a given text to face its own humanist presuppositions). We place the posthumanist emphasis on the context and role of the reader, because we feel – taking our cue from a combination of deconstruction and psychoanalysis – that the importance of a text lies in its facilitation of specific forms of reception and their potential for political change and transformation of (human) readers. We do not, however, speculate about a "posthuman reader" as Guesse seems to misread us, in the sense of a "reader who should be able to pretend that it is not human".[50] We, in fact, do not 'care' much for such 'readers' if they existed (i.e. if they be 'readers' at all, in this strong, admittedly residual humanist and anthropocentric, sense of the term), if they were to be posthuman, i.e. no longer human. However, a (bio)technologically enhanced human or clone, I would argue, is still (in terms of category) human, which is why Guesse's reading of Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* on which she bases her argument is flawed. The important differentiation here is that we suggest that one may read *as if* from a posthuman point of view – which is necessarily a move of what one might call 'strategic anthropomorphism' – to gain some (if unreliable) detachment from what seems 'natural' about the human. It is a classic Barthesian move of 'demythologisation':

> To read in a posthuman way is to read against one's self, against one's own deep-seated self-understanding as a member or even representative of a certain 'species'. It is already to project an otherness to the human, to sympathise and empathise with a position that troubles and undoes identity while struggling to reassert what is familiar and defining.[51]

Obviously, the motivation behind this posthumanist form of reader empathy is precisely the kind of 'solidarity with the non/human' (i.e. with both humans and nonhumans and their mutual rearticulations) that unites the individual chapters and readings in this volume. As we go on to point out, the motivation behind such a posthumanist reading is inevitably informed by 'care' – namely care for the human (and the nonhuman, very much less: the posthuman) – in the sense that the "deconstruction of the integrity of the human and the [nonhuman] other, of the natural and the inalienable (…) cannot fail to be empathetic to the degree that it is, self-evidently, human, and thereby invested in what it divests".[52] However, in thus unlearning to be humanist (and in doing so, hopefully relearning to be human, differently or otherwise), in (temporarily) divesting or 'inhumansing' (not: 'dehumanising') one's self, the human demonstrates 'care', but this care is no longer the anthropocentric care of traditional humanism but, through its necessary detour via nonhuman otherness, it is a practice of care that is no longer exclusionary.[53]

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[49] Herbrechter and Callus, "What is a posthumanist reading?", p. 95.

[50] Guesse, "On the Possibilty of Posthuman/ist Literature(s)", p. 29.

[51] Herbrechter and Callus, "What is a posthumanist reading?", p. 95.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

While Guesse suggests, “even if a posthumanist reading does not necessarily require a posthuman character, the presence of a posthuman character in the novel is very likely to engender a posthumanist reading of the novel”, I would contend that this depends on what one is reading *for* in such a performance. Reading is never a disinterested practice because it is always based on contexts, selection and experience (a classical hermeneutic insight). There is always a politics at work (a classical poststructuralist insight) and a posthumanist reading is ultimately motivated by its discursive situation. In other words, it is seeking to make a statement about posthumanism, about what it is, what it is not, and about what it should be. This is precisely what we understand by ‘critical posthumanism’, i.e. a posthumanism that is critical in the sense that may still be recognisable by (literary or cultural) criticism, but which is also governed by a critical, or indeed metacritical, detachment from posthumanism (in all its variants) as such. This also explains why the simple fact that there are ‘posthuman’ characters in a novel (or any text) in no way guarantees a posthumanist reading unless that reading also investigates what the presence of that character *does* (i.e. the way it resists, negotiates or reinscribes humanist values), or, in other words, to what extend it actually ‘de-anthropocentres’ the human. And since (especially mainstream) texts want to engage their human readers (even if by challenging some of their expectations), they are inevitably also governed by generic conventions and the learned (usually very humanist) conscious or unconscious desires of these readers, the most unsurmountable and inexhaustible of which is the desire for closure (again, a classical poststructuralist point).

This is why we base our argument not on the perceived quality of either a posthumanist text or its reading but instead propose that many, if not most, texts contain what we call “posthumanist moments”, i.e. “moments in which humanism is threatened and the posthumanist other is unleashed [and which] need to be taken seriously (maybe even ‘literally’) and forced back onto the texts”.[54] A focus on these moments of possible ‘disruption’ (of reversal and the strategies of containment it might provoke) is what makes a critically posthumanist stance possible – the readings in this volume, I would claim, all engage with specific instances of this; all focus on these, admittedly, fascinating moments when a text that itself challenges humanist expectations, and opens up possibilities that produce both anxieties and desires, and then feels compelled to resolve or foreclose (in closing) the very ambiguities it itself discovered. These readings (in their classic deconstructive moves) are “expressions of care” (for the human and its literature): “In reading the humanism inscribed within texts that at the same time explore humanism’s limits, a critical posthumanist approach aims to open up possibilities for alternatives to the constraints of humanism as a system of values”.[55]

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[53] In that sense, caring for the posthuman – understood in the transhumanist sense of a kind of technologically enhanced species that in evolutionary terms promises to eventually supplant the human – seems like a contradiction in terms, except if one agreed to take responsibility for an either suicidal or cynical current tendency of humans “to argue themselves out of the picture”.

[54] *Ibid*., p. 100.

[55] *Ibid*., p. 107.

To summarise one more time before I let the readings in the following chapters speak for themselves: the underlying topology of my argument for ‘solidarities with the non/human’ in this volume and my understanding of critical posthumanism in relation to literature more generally depends on the distinction between posthumanism as a discourse and the posthuman as a figure. Posthumanism is that discourse that takes the posthuman as its ‘object’, i.e. posthumanism is about the posthuman and its meanings. The post- in posthumanism and in the posthuman, however, cannot be an absolute break with or transcendence of what it qualifies. Posthumanism is in that sense not straightforwardly ‘after’ or ‘beyond’ humanism, but qualifies it and in doing so can be understood as a critique of what it ‘posts’. Hence the phrase ‘critical posthumanism’ which highlights that we are tracking and aiming for a ‘deconstruction of humanism’, which understands humanism not as finished or complete but as in ‘crisis’ – one could call that ‘late humanism’, humanism confronting its own end(s), and in doing so seeking rearticulation, renewal or indeed gesturing towards something entirely other (hence also sometimes the strategic use of ‘inhumanism’ and the ‘inhuman’). Similarly, the posthuman cannot be (despite the way it is used by some transhumanists) some form, being or species that comes after or has moved beyond the human. The post, just like in posthumanism, here merely qualifies rather than negates or transcends (the human). It merely signals that we are dealing with a human that understands itself as no longer (quite) human. In doing so, it gestures either to a ‘new human’, an ‘other human’ or something radically other that cannot (yet) be named as such. Posthumanist is the adjectival form of posthumanism, in this sense. It can strictly speaking only be used to designate something that implies a critique of humanism and its main characteristic or its central value, namely, its anthropocentrism – the idea that humans are exceptional, and that they share something that is both unique and universal, usually an essential ‘human nature’. A whole string of other values and binary oppositions build on this to constitute what one might call a ‘worldview’ or a ‘metaphysics’, i.e. a way of making sense of the world. Given that humanism is a worldview that has dominated the ‘West’ for more than five hundred years and arguably even longer,[56] it is not surprising that prefigurations of contemporary posthumanist critique of humanism exist *alongside* humanism. Humanism has indeed been haunted by its posthumanisms from the very beginning. This is the reason why the posthumanist readings in this volume span ‘across the ages’ (from Shakespeare to contemporary literature, or from early to late humanism, one might say).

In terms of literature this leads to the following classification: literature is a humanist institution whose main purpose either explicitly or implicitly has always been to show a human reader what it is to be human. It is an essential part of what Giorgio Agamben calls the ‘anthropological machine’.[57] Its aim is ‘anthropogenic’ – it ‘produces’ and confirms readers in their humanity. In this strong sense, there cannot be anything like ‘posthumanist literature’ in the strict, most literal sense (which is an interesting sense to consider, as it happens, and key to this debate) because literature that would stop implying its human addressee would no longer be literature. It would be something else. Even when literature depicts posthumans it can only do so within an anthropomorphic (but not necessarily anthropocentric) framework. A literature in which the posthuman figure proliferates might be called, more promisingly, a 'literature of the posthuman'. However, this would still not be 'posthumanist literature'. That does not mean that literature cannot engage with posthumanism or negotiate posthumanist ideas. Some literature is (undeniably, also) critical (in the same sense critical posthumanism is critical). That is also one reason why literature endures or 'survives'. It challenges traditional notions of humanity, surprises by extremes that humans have to negotiate, it extends what it means to be human, but ultimately, if it wants to be read, it must also reconfirm the (re- or deconstructed) human as its intended reader. It can also challenge and extend what is meant by literature, but ultimately, since it wants to be read as fiction – this is its source of power, namely that it is free to imagine anything – it must also reconfirm the existence of the institution (and the 'time' or context) it belongs to and by which it will be judged.

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[56] The question to what extent the non-Western world is also characterised by some form of humanism-anthropocentrism is something that will have to be left to anthropologists, or maybe even better to the postanthropologists to come.

[57] Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

Criticism is a commentary on literature (and culture, society and 'the world' more generally) which goes beyond purely aesthetic judgements or pedagogical values or messages to some 'non-expert' reader. It is itself informed by political (and ethical) presuppositions. One always reads to find something – one's expectations can be either confirmed, rejected or changed. In the case of a posthumanist reading, one obviously reads *for* posthumanism. One tries to identify, analyse and emphasise those 'moments' in texts that challenge and/or (re)confirm humanist assumptions. But in the name of what? This depends on what aspect of a posthumanist critique of humanist anthropocentrism one foregrounds.

There is a growing body of critical work that reads literature in terms of the ways in which it engages with 'nonhuman' forms of agency – narratives by or about nonhuman characters.[58] Some of the readings in this volume that wish to be understood as 'solidary' of nonhuman animals, the environment, or indeed machines, play with the notion of 'animal writing', 'life-writing', or 'ecography'. Animal writing could be understood as writing about animals, by using animal characters, e.g. fables, however; but it could also be understood literally, as (nonhuman) animals, writing, traces and tracks, spider webs and elephant cemeteries and so on. Posthuman literature might be precisely that: literature 'written' not by humans, although 'nonhuman literature' would then be the more exact term. This 'literature' if it was read as literature by humans would still be unlikely to be posthuman*ist*, however, as long as these reading protocols are not also changed. Life-writing – hyphenated – could be understood, more than an extended notion of the biographical, namely as a 'vitalist' notion of life being both the object and the subject of writing. Again, the question arises, who would life-writing be written *for*, who is its addressee? Generalising the notion of writing – as has been happening, following Derrida's move,[59] since the 'geological turn' and the idea of the 'Anthropocene' – as something that all material changes constitute a form of 'writing', most of which happens in the absence of any human reader, or, even before or outside life, and thus of any reader, full stop. The realisation and depiction of the fact that human agency is only one (often insignificant) source of writing and that it is entangled with a myriad of nonhuman actors and factors certainly has entered literature in the time of the 'Anthropocene'. It leads to a heightened ecological consciousness in both literature and criticism – what I would like to call 'ecography' – but again, ultimately, the question of the addressee needs to be posed. I assume, even the most radical uptake of posthumanist ideas in literature ultimately happens for humanist reasons; it is supposed to make us 'better' readers, 'better' humans. I do not think that this is problematic at all. Who else would care about 'solidarities with the non/human' than humans, after all?

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[58] Cf. Sanna Karkuletho, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis, eds., *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2020); and Matthias Stephan and Sune Borkfelt, eds., *Interrogating Boundaries of the Nonhuman: Literature, Climate Change, and Environmental Crises* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022). There are two recent overview chapters on literature and posthumanism that also deal with this angle, cf. Ivan Callus, "Literature and Posthumanism", and Sherryl Vint, "Posthumanism and Speculative Fiction", both in Stefan Herbrechter et al., eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (Cham: Springer, 2022), pp. 673-701 and pp. 225-246 respectively. Also relevant here is Pieter Vermeulen's work, cf. apart from the already cited "Future Readers: Narrating the Human in the Anthropocene", his *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and "The End of the Novel", in: Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann, eds., *New Approaches to the Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 317-336.

This is also why the conclusion turns to tragedy, precisely so that everything does not end in it. Ending in tragedy – this is what critical posthumanism suspects will happen should one let humanism run its course. Tragedy is the ultimate test of humanity. The human always has to go through a process of catharsis, of purifying, of taking the right decision, of manifesting its freedom. Ending in tragedy – that is what lies on the trajectory of humanism both in the form of environmental catastrophe and technoutopian euphoria. Posthumanist readings will have to continue to expose these suicidal dynamics inherent in humanist anthropocentrism and its further extrapolations into the future. They need to open up possibilities for alternatives, for nonhumans, for life, for other futures, for the not-yet-quite-imaginable, and thus for the literatures of tomorrow.

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[59] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

Section I: Posthumanism Writes Back

1 Shakespeare and After

> Shakespeare, like the sun, is a metaphor; he always means something other than he is.[60]

Edward Pechter's by now classic *What Was Shakespeare* sets out to evaluate Shakespeare Studies after the so-called "Theory Wars" and concludes that, at the turn of the millennium at least, there was no "end of Shakespeare Studies as We Know It" in sight, rather a "transformation".[61] This transformation – the result of ideological battles over the role of literature, history, politics and aesthetic value – seemed to have shattered a kind of previous consensus, or, as Pechter calls it, a "unified discourse"[62] in Shakespeare criticism. The unified discourse, was that of "formalist humanism"[63] which collapsed as a result of the combined attack of poststructuralist theory, postmodernism, feminism, postcolonialism, new historicism and cultural materialism. At the centre of this "alternative" and "political" Shakespeare were "questions about textuality and history, and about subjectivity, agency, and political effectiveness".[64] Where the self-stylised radicalism of the new dissidents saw discontinuity, however, Pechter in his critique sees nothing but continuity – since dissidence and radical critique are the very backbone of the humanities and humanism itself. This is a tenet that has become quite strong in recent years: the antihumanism of theory and new historicism relies in fact on a caricature of ('liberal') humanism and detracts from the idea that the humanities have always depended and thrived on dissensus, rather than on a kind of enforced ideological consensus, as their fundamental form of knowledge production – an argument most forcefully made by Edward Said almost twenty years ago.[65]

There is of course something utterly disarming about the idea of the humanities – the core of the venerable humanist institution called 'University' – as thriving on dissensus rather than agreement. And it is true that some of the antihumanism of theory today, upon re-reading, appears somewhat 'naff' and, its use of politicised 'jargon', at times sounds almost like 'agit-prop'. But the idea that a return to the some idealised 'radical humanism' might be possible is equally unconvincing, simply because the cherished humanist university ceased to exist at the same time as theory, cultural studies and the new interdisciplinarity apparently came to rule over it. The university (and the humanities) has been "in ruins" ever since[66] and merely survives in its neoliberal, managerialised, 'posthistorical' and 'postcultural' form. With it ceased not only the consensus of a 'unified discourse' (for example in Shakespeare criticism), but also, in a sense, 'Shakespeare' himself. As Scott Wilson explaind, at the time, Shakespeare had already become a mere icon, an empty metaphor, a commodity and an "object of an institutionally channelled desire".[67] Hence also Wilson's conclusion that whatever remains of Shakespeare is subject to "heterology". Shakespeare criticism 'after' Shakespeare has therefore been looking for what remains ‘other’ and “utterly heterogeneous to his homogenized cultural body”.[68] As Wilson rightly pointed out, this heterology can still be recuperated by a new form of humanism. Shakespeare may have become a “collapsing star” and a “black hole”,[69] or a “dense, retentive abyss reflecting nothing but the horror, the impotent plight of the would-be uniquely clever, honest and above all disciplined Shakespeare scholar faced with over 4,000 items lodged by the World Shakespeare Bibliography every year and the certain knowledge that any and every interpretation evaporates the instant it is written”;[70] but the human and humanist urge of the Shakespeare scholar past, present and to come should not be underestimated. Shakespeare’s “solar unassailability” will not stop engulfing humanistic scholarly labour. So, what to do when humanism in its most antihumanist, political and theoretical form becomes a cynical ‘reflex’? If this sounds like an almost existentialist dilemma, it probably is, and hence the call for ‘authentic’ action cannot be far off. We know, since Sartre, that existentialism is also a humanism, a ‘dogged’ and desperate kind of humanism ‘*malgré tout*’. Wilson’s proposed ‘authentic’ action, in fact, follows Bataille’s logic in “putting [Shakespeare] back into the use circuit *as* shit” and “putting all of Shakespeare’s shit, all that is remote, revolting, terrible, Other and so on back into play”.[71] Shakespeare’s texts thus become the ‘resident evil’, that which cannot be recuperated by any humanism, simply because it is not (entirely) human. Investigations into the ‘inhuman’ in Shakespeare, consequently, are what has been proliferating since and while these readings are not immune to a recuperation by humanism they are nevertheless no longer entirely humanist. I would suggest, they are, for want of a better word, ‘posthumanist’.

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[60] Scott Wilson, "Heterology", in: Nigel Wood, ed. *The Merchant of Venice* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996), p. 128.

[61] Edward Pechter, *What Was Shakespeare? Renaissance Plays and Changing Critical Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 14.

[62] *Ibid*., p. 18.

[63] *Ibid*., p. 30.

[64] *Ibid*., p. 38.

[65] Edward Said's *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004).

[66] Cf. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[67] Wilson, "Heterology", p. 129.

However, posthumanist does not imply a simple turning away, neither from humanism nor from theory, but rather a ‘working through’ or a ‘deconstruction of humanism’ for which something like theory is needed more than ever. It also is no turning away from historicism and materialism, but it is a historicism and materialism adapted to the changed, ‘posthuman condition’. One aspect of this condition ‘after’ humanism is the lost consensus, the lost universalism, concerning history and culture. The relevance of Shakespeare after humanism lies in a combination of the “presentism”, the strategic anachronism, even futurism, expressed in Linda Charnes’s well-known essay “We were never early modern”,[72] in which she claims that Shakespeare in contemporary culture stands for “Historicity itself”.[73] It is not so much ‘calendar time’ but the intensity of ‘subjective time’ outside the dialectic between early and late modernity that resonates in Shakespearean characters like Hamlet. They are “always already postmodern, or rather, *amodern* – since (…) one cannot ‘post’ something that has not yet happened”.[74] This is not to say, however, that their value lies in a timeless aestheticist human essence, or that they speak to the ‘heart of human feeling’. Instead, what they highlight – in analogy with Bruno Latour’s argument in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) – is that modernity (and therefore also humanism) remains a ‘virtuality’, or an impossible task:

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[68] *Ibid*.

[69] Cf. Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (London: Hogarth Press, 1990).

[70] Wilson, “Heterology”, pp. 130-131.

[71] *Ibid*., p. 136.

[72] Linda Charnes, *Hamlet’s Heirs: Shakespeare and the Politics of a New Millennium* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 43-52.

[73] *Ibid*., p. 42.

[74] *Ibid*., p. 47.

> If Latour is correct that we have never been modern, then Hamlet has never been early modern, we have never been postmodern, and we are all, along with the pesky Prince, stuck in the same boat with regard to what, exactly, 'being historicist' means (…). Hamlet continues to speak to us because he continues to be 'timeless': not because he 'transcends' history but because *we were never early modern*.[75]

Shakespeare 'After' Theory

> A conjunction between tradition and novelty in Shakespeare's plays exercises an enchantment at once renewable and altogether singular.[76]

It seems thus that after several decades of heated ideological debates, theory, canon and culture wars, if not entirely settled, have somewhat petered out amidst the general crisis and decline of the humanities. Hardened ideological positions on historicist and cultural relativism and the role of truth, politics, ethics and aesthetic value in literature and culture have mellowed. However, the role of the early modern period, the Renaissance and Shakespeare after having been hotly contested by new historicists, cultural materialists, traditionalists and humanists, remains as unclear and ambiguous as ever. As a result there is a new uncertainty in Shakespeare and early modern studies. The uncertainty this time however seems more profound – too pressing are the 'future-of-the-humanities' and the 'role-of-literature' questions to allow for a simple return to business as usual in the post-theoretical English department. What returns instead is a new kind of pluralism, precisely around the notion of the 'human' and 'humanism', and around the relationship between literature and life. Humanism, having been one of the main targets of theory, continues to be the main battleground, arguably this time in its pluralised form: humanism*s*.[77] A new dissensus about the past, present and future of humanism and its subject – the human – emerges, as a result of new threats. The 'posthuman' and 'posthumanism' have been taking shape, but just like the fragmentation of humanism into 'mainstream' or 'liberal humanism', 'existentialist humanism', 'radical humanism' etc., the uncertainty and pluralisation spills over into that which is supposed to supersede it. Posthumans promise and threaten in many familiar and sometimes less familiar forms. Posthumanisms revaluate, reject, extend, rewrite many aspects of real or invented humanisms. There is no surprise in this, because that is what the prefix 'post-' does. This is its rhetorical essence: it ambiguates. It plays with supersession, crisis, deconstruction, regression and progression at once. Its main virtue, if one choses to take it seriously, is to defamiliarise, detach and surprise. Arguing for 'posthumanist Shakespeares' does not mean to exclude the resurfacing of the human and humanism in a more fragile form. It means that 'we' still 'care' about the human, humanness, humanity, but that 'we' also embrace the new plurality and the new questions that are put to humanism, antihumanism, posthumanism, even transhumanism alike: questions of human survival in late-modern, global, techno-scientific hypercapitalist societies and their technocultures, facing extinction threats, global migration and climate meltdown. Above all, it means confronting humanism with its 'specters' – the inhuman, the superhuman, the nonhuman in all their invented, constructed or actual forms. It is a strategic move away from anthropocentric premises: the human can no longer be taken for granted, humanity as a universal value is no longer self-legitimating, humanism as a reflex or self-reflex cannot be trusted. To stay 'critical' (in a humanistic, 'philological' sense)[78] in these times of plurality and global risk means to re-read, to read carefully and differently. I would like to suggest the label 'critically posthumanist' as a compromise that shows the care, the scepticism and the openness towards Shakespeare 'after' Shakespeare, or Shakespeare after humanism. Some of its guiding questions are: is there life beyond Shakespeare? What Shakespeare for the age of 'life sciences', biotechnology and biopolitics? What does Shakespeare have to tell us about our post-anthropocentric or even post-biological times? Can we still make him our contemporary?

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[75] Charnes, *Hamlet's Heirs*, pp. 48, 52)

[76] Catherine Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007), p. 20.

[77] A point made, although in a much less charitable way, by Claus Uhlig, "Humanism(s) – Beyond the 'New Historicism'", in: *Literatur und Philosophie* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2004), pp. 23-42.

It must be clear, however, that these kind of questions cannot be answered without further but maybe different theorising. Critical posthumanism (CPH) is theorising that is no longer entrenched in ideological dogmatism. Rather, it is a more 'relaxed' and open-minded theoretical approach that values the lessons learned from the theory and other wars. Theory that puts its ear to the ground and listens to the new sounds, which, it is true, mostly come from the 'sciences' these days – bio-, info-, cogno-, neuro- etc. sciences to be precise. It is no wonder that, in the face of the challenges that these new sciences, after the so-called 'science wars', the question of the human and the question of the relationship between literature and life come back to haunt the humanities. By referring to the current climate as 'posthumanist', I do not mean 'dehumanising' but simply that the human and humanity are in transition or transformation. Humanism – the discourse about what it means to be human – is in the process of transformation and hence the object of this discourse – the human (who is also its subject, but maybe no longer exclusively so) – is being rewritten. The anxiety and desires that this change and uncertainty cause reopen, for Shakespeare studies, the question of the bard's (or by now also the "CyberBard's")[79] role within the history of humanism.

The argument as to what exactly Shakespeare's humanism entails and what function it plays in his work is far from being settled, and remains to be pursued in all its complexity. It goes beyond critiques of the positioning of Shakespeare as a mainstay of a 'liberal' education, or the temptation to read decadence or 'anarchy' (as Matthew Arnold might have had it) in any of the related counter-positions. It is in any case not a question of polarisation between pro- and antihumanists that is needed in order to continue to make Shakespeare and the early modern period relevant to our so called 'posthumanist' moment. What is at stake, instead, is a historically and textually informed clarification of the privileged relationship between the early modern on the one hand and the late modern, or even postmodern, on the other: between early humanism and a humanism that may be on its last legs, awaiting either its renewal or, indeed, its end. This opens onto what I mean by 'posthumanism'. Posthumanism, as I understand it, is a critical stance that is at one and the same time aware of at least three choices for a contemporary literary criticism mindful of the interdisciplinary temper of our time. The first of these choices reacts to the consequences of what is most canonical within the canon becoming increasingly detached from any of the assumptions that consolidated a humanist paradigm. The second choice responds to outlooks that distance themselves even further from those assumptions, and recognises that the implications of bio-, nano-, cogno- and info-technology on body, mind, culture, and epistemology have now become part of mainstream debate within the humanities and within interdisciplinary explorations of the integrity of the human. It should therefore be possible to read Shakespeare according to re-conceptualisations influenced by these outlooks – among them the possibility that Shakespeare may have 'invented the posthuman' as well as the human. The third choice remains doggedly insistent that nothing much substantially has changed, that Shakespeare has survived far worse upheavals than these, and that it continues to be perfectly feasible to read him as if there were no hint of a brave new world that has such posthumanists in it.

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[78] Cf. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*.

[79] Linda Charnes, "Styles That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Ideology Critique", *Shakespeare Studies* 24 (1996): 142.

Reading Shakespeare through CPH means revisiting the humanist/antihumanist debate in the light of current thinking, cultural practices, and re-orientations towards the posthuman. In practical terms, this involves recognising that at present the question of what it means to be human is being asked in the context of dramatic technological change and global environmental threats. Rereading Shakespeare within this present therefore takes on a new and exciting relevance. To discuss whether Shakespeare's work coincides with the invention of the human is surely to question also his understanding of the inhuman, the nonhuman, the more-than-human, the less-than-human. Above all, it involves exploring whether the posthuman, too, finds itself there already. Is it prefigured, represented, contested in Shakespeare? If so, is it possible to come up with a posthumanist approach to Shakespeare that would be able to respond to his work in the light of critical perspectives that retain the memory of humanism but which also seek to exemplify what posthumanist interpretation might entail?

Shakespeare 'After' Humanism

> Life itself has become a naturalistic unreality, partly, because of Shakespeare's prevalence (…). To have invented our feelings is to have gone beyond psychologizing us: Shakespeare made us theatrical (…).[80]

The question of Shakespeare's humanism has created a vast amount of controversy and heated debate between self-proclaimed humanists and proponents of a politicised new historicist and cultural materialist Shakespeare. The argument has mostly been fought at an ideological level and has involved some strategic misrepresentations of the other camp. New Historicists and cultural materialists have been reduced to 'postmodernists', or 'constructivist anti-essentialists', while all too often defenders of Shakespeare's 'humanism' have themselves been caricatured as politically naïve, reactionary, or idealist-*cum*-aestheticist. Those who seek a ready point of reference for this debate need go no further than reactions to Harold Bloom's notorious equation of Shakespeare with the "invention of the human", and his idea that we were "pragmatically invented" by Shakespeare.

Indeed, Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare – The Invention of the Human* (1999) insists on explaining Shakespeare's pervasiveness through his apparent universalism. It is of course a very Western universalism that Bloom has in mind because he equates it with the invention of (modern) personality, which, in turn, is taken to be, as the subtitle professes, the “invention of the human”:

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[80] Bloom, *Shakespeare*, p. 13.

> More even than all the other Shakesperean prodigies – Rosalind, Shylock, Iago, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra – Falstaff and Hamlet are the invention of the human, the inauguration of personality as we have come to recognize it. The Idea of Western character, of the self as a moral agent, has many sources: Homer and Plato, Aristoteles and Sophocles, the Bible and St. Augustine, Dante and Kant, and all you might care to add. Personality, in our sense, is a Shakespearean invention, and is not only Shakespeare’s greatest originality but also the authentic cause of his perpetual pervasiveness.[81]

For Bloom, Shakespeare *is* the Western and *therefore* the universal canon, and thus the only defense against the “anti-elitist swamp of Cultural Studies”[82] which has presumably led to the current identity crisis within the humanities. Quite obviously, Bloom represents all that has been discredited in ‘mainstream’ humanism: an aestheticism that makes moral political (i.e. liberal) judgments on the basis of an apparent “empirical supremacy”.[83]

While Bloom defended the universalism and meliorism of the humanistic project against postmodern cultural relativism, others, like Robin Headlam Wells in their defense of humanism and their attack on theory’s antiessentialism and cultural constructivism turned to quite unlikely allies, like evolution, biology and genetics. Quite ironically, the idea that there may be a human ‘essence’ after all, even if it is not cultural but genetic, was seen as ‘liberating’. Humanity from this angle is not a construct but a ‘predisposition’, the self not an invention but a neuropsychologically explicable effect of hard-wired evolution-driven brain activity. As a result, literature (including criticism), strictly speaking, becomes a branch of ‘cognitive poetics’ and neuroscience. I would certainly agree that in the light of technoscientific change literary criticism cannot stand still. But, from my point of view, it is precisely because of this change that a straight-forwardly humanist understanding of literature is no longer possible. Replacing theoretical anti-essentialism and constructivism with a new bioscientific essentialism cannot repair humanism, and using genetic notions of human ‘nature’ to defend oneself against antihumanist theory only accelerates the proliferation of a rather uncritical posthumanism. Wells’s project in *Shakespeare’s Humanism* (2005), which was to show “the centrality of human nature in Shakespeare’s universe”, “by listening to what other disciplines have to say about human nature”, in order for criticism to “move on from an outdated anti-humanism”,[84] turned out to be rather counter-productive. The anti-anti-essentialism directed against new historicism and theory was bought at the price of a new ‘naturalism’ and techno-idealism. Instead, there is now a new, and I would claim, posthumanist, materialism available that does engage with technological challenges not by comparing concpets of ‘human nature’ but, precisely, by denaturing the ‘human’. One simply does not need the mystification of a phrase like ‘human nature’ to explain what constitutes our species’s biological and cultural charcateristics once evolution is no longer confused with teleology. This does not invalidate the theory of evolution, it merely helps to ‘de-anthropocentre’ it. It is important not to confuse or freely slide between universalism and essentialism in terms of human 'nature'. The fact that members of the species *homo sapiens (sapiens)* share genetic and cultural characteristics which, at a basic non-normative level, are undoubtedly universal, does not *automatically* lead to moral aesthetic values about 'human nature' since the concept of nature just like all the concepts used in science (from 'life' to 'gene') are first and foremost linguistically and culturally mediated entities. CPH is turning its back neither on constructivism, nor on materialism and historicism, nor on the idea that universal *meaning* like truth is not given but *made*. A statement like Wells's "If there were no universal passions and humours, we would have no means of evaluating literature from another age or another culture: a text would have value only for the community in which it was produced",[85] is not an argument against a presumed theoretical 'presentism', because it neglects the fundamentally hermeneutic condition of all human and maybe also nonhuman knowledge, namely that meaning, including historical and scientific meaning always needs to be appropriated and interpreted by a materially, historically, and radically contextualised subject. This is, in fact, precisely what Wells is doing in attempting to redress what he thinks is an imbalance. What else does it prove to show that Shakespeare and his historical Renaissance or early modern context were already in many ways anti-essentialist, than to increase (and construct) Shakespeare's continued, renewed, intensified, modulated etc. relevance to our own, equally constructed, stance regarding *our* present time? I regard the opening up of literature and criticism 'after' humanism, following on from and thus inheriting postmodern theory, towards what appear to be fundamental technoscientific challenges, towards a constructed human nature, as inevitable but not as unproblematic – hence my call for a *critical* posthumanism.[86]

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[81] *Ibid*., p. 4.

[82] *Ibid*., p. 17.

[83] *Ibid*., p. 16.

[84] Wells, *Shakespeare’s Humanism*, p. 5.

Life 'After' Shakespeare

> Can Shakespeare help us with the question of how to live?[87]

For Andy Mousley, in *Re-Humanising Shakespeare* (2007), Shakespeare's 'greatness' undoubtedly lies in his 'humanity'. He tries to revive the idea of "Shakespeare as sage" or of the great writer's "wisdom" as that part of Arnoldian criticism that looks upon literature as a "coherent criticism of life". Mousley sees a resurgence of "literary humanism" after anti-humanist theory that reaffirms literature as an "antidote to dehumanisation, alienation and instrumentalism".[88] Shakespeare's ethics and the "existential significance" of his writings for living an "authentically human" life should not, however, do away with antihumanist theory's "scepticism".[89] Mousley tackles this seemingly impossible task by differentiating between what he calls "mainstream humanism" ("individualism, (…) sovereignty, unbridled freedom, autonomy and a magnified image of humanity")[90] – which was and continues to be the justified target of theoretical scepticism – and 'other humanisms' that do not depart from a 'transcendent' human 'nature', but see the essence of humanness as an exploration of its limits – or, as Jean Paul Sartre famously explained, in defending existentialism against what he called '*les naturalistes*', that it, existentialism, is a humanism, because it starts from a radicalised idea of freedom (namely, as responsibility and task) and from the lack of determination in anything human, captured in the phrase: "*l'existence précède l'essence*". For Mousley, however, we cannot be just anything. Having examined the various scepticisms and nihilisms staged by Shakespeare in Part 1 of his book, Mousley turns in Part 2 to plays which indicate the persistence of certain bodily and emotional needs, and explores the implications of these needs for questions of value and ethics. In short, Shakespeare was both, a sceptic and a sage, a kind of ironic humanist. Mousley thus puts his trust in Shakespeare to achieve a "better humanism",[91] one that constitutes an attempt "to answer the question of what remains of the human, when 'the human' like all else is liable to evaporate".[92] Shakespeare, he hopes, may help us to "become human",[93] after all.

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[85] *Ibid*., p. 192.

[86] See Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanismus: Eine kritische Einführung* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2009) and *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[87] Andy Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 1.

[88] *Ibid*., p. 8.

[89] *Ibid*., p. 12.

[90] *Ibid*., pp. 16, 17.

Mousley, in what I would call his 'yearning for the human',[94] is following in the footsteps of eminent critical humanists like Edward Said, for whom humanism is first of all, literally speaking, self-criticism, while the foremost task of every humanist scholar or 'philologist' is to be critical of humanism itself. As admirable and noble as this existential, almost desperately hopeful, yearning for our 'promised' humanity is, the radical openness of the human and thinking the human 'at the limits' are part of a very risky strategy. Humanism has never been able to guarantee anything, and even Shakespeare as 'life coach' cannot perform miracles. There have always been humans who yearned for something entirely other than (being) human – and currently their number seems to be on the rise again. One can yearn for God, the machine, artificial intelligence, transhuman successor species, in short, transcendence in any form. This is why I have no confidence in merely radicalising the critical potential that undoubtedly lies in some forms of humanism.[95] Instead I would insist on using the admittedly awkward 'posthumanist' label, at the risk of being mistaken for a 'techno-enthusiast'. But the historical-material imperative compels one to take the newness of the posthuman challenge seriously and to a certain extent, literally. Shakespeare 'after' humanism is still humanist – maybe. But the challenge to the humanist tradition does not just stem from antihumanist theory, it also lies in 'post-, de-, super-, trans-' etc. humanising tendencies *within* technoscience and late capitalist humanity itself. In this sense, Shakespeare is not only 'after' humanism, he is also 'after' technology and, ultimately, 'after' the human as such.

Shakespeare 'After' Technology

In many ways, the posthuman gestures towards technology and cultural change that, if not driven by, at least is inseparable from technological and scientific development. However, that this is no one-way street is demonstrated by works like Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday's *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print* (2000), Arthur F. Kinney's *Shakespeare's Webs: Networks of Meaning in Renaissance Drama* (2004) or Adam

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[91] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[92] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

[93] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[94] To paraphrase Akeel Bilgrami's introduction to Edward Said's *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*.

[95] Cf. Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley, *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).

Max Cohen's *Shakespeare and Technology: Dramatizing Early Modern Technological Revolutions* (2006). Shakespeare's own awareness of technological change in early modern culture takes place at a time when modern knowledge partitioning was not yet in place and thus interdisciplinarity or rather 'transdisciplinarity' made a dialogue between early scientific investigation and humanistic study relatively simple. There was also no modern sense of 'technology' but merely mechanical practices, tools, new instruments, machines and artefacts or 'techniques'. That technical and machinic metaphors are present in Shakespeare's works is no secret; but their ambiguity is also a reflection of a developing general cultural ambiguity towards the machinic human 'other'. Especially in such a mechanical environment as the theatre the mixing of human and machine, and thus early modern forms of 'cyborgisation', are never far off – a process that Cohen names "turning tech", by which he means the "description of the individual as a machine".[96] If the early modern age is the beginning of the *homo mechanicus*, and if early modern literature gives rise to something like the literary cyborg,[97] there is also ambiguity about the distinction between nature and culture, the boundaries of the body, biology and spirituality, materialism and idealism, emotion and cognition. No wonder that cognitive and neurosciences are increasingly called upon to explain the cognitive cultural 'map' of the early modern mind and "Shakespeare's brain".[98] All these are attempts to demonstrate the continued if not increased relevance of Shakespeare and the privileged relationship between early and late modern culture. One useful analogy here might be the image of 'retrofitting', in the sense of creating an adaptability between old and new (technologies, and by analogy cultures and their readings) which thus represent a kind of reinforcing and bridging continuity. Reading Shakespeare through and with CPH is about 'retrofitting' the early modern in this sense – combining technological change with continuity and cultural 'ecology'. Links are forged between the "first age of print" and that which presents itself as maybe the last age of print with its transition to digital and digitalised culture and their respective major conceptual reorientations. As Rhodes and Sawday put it:

> The computer, through its possibilities for interactivity, 'play' and the creativity of hypertext, is now rapidly undoing that idealization of stability [underpinning the age of print], and returning us to a kind of textuality which may have more in common with the pre-print era.[99]

Even though the Shakespearean text will undoubtedly survive into the digital age, the idea and the available technologies relating to text and textuality (cf. the wonderful French phrase *traitement de texte*) – text, which itself, as Graham Holderness reminded us, is in its irreducible multiplicity a piece of technology[100] – will change, have already changed the practice of textual editing and literary criticism. It is thus becoming increasingly difficult to disentangle

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[96] Adam Max Cohen, *Shakespeare and Technology: Dramatizing Early Modern Technological Revolutions* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2006), p. 17.

[97] Cf. Jonathan Sawday, Renaissance Cyborg", in: Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert and Susan Wiseman, eds., *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 171-195.

[98] Cf. Mary Thomas Crane, *Shakespeare's Brain: Reading With Cognitive Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[99] Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday, eds., *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 11-12.

[100] Graham Holderness, *Textual Shakespeare: Writing and the Word* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2003).

‘pastism’ (historicism), ‘presentism’ and ‘futurism’ in Shakespeare studies (and culture more generally) ‘after’ technology.

Shakespeare ‘After’ the Human

Ultimately, the effect of the collapsing of the humanist tradition and the radical opening of the ‘human’ and its meaning, is motivated ethically, hence the major focus on nonhuman others, the inhuman, the subhuman but also the superhuman. On the one hand, there is the ‘greening’ of Shakespeare through various forms of ecocriticism; on the other, the postanthropocentric thrust of posthumanist theory that concerns itself with all kinds of nonhuman others also radicalises the eternal ‘animal question’. Gabriel Egan explained his motives in writing *Green Shakespeare* (2006) as an attempt to “show that our understanding of Shakespeare and our understanding of Green politics have overlapping concerns”.[101] The increasing and concretising threat of environmental disaster, questions of sustainability and the contemporary critique of ‘speciesism’ actually go hand in hand. What do early modern forms of ‘ecology’ and attitudes towards nature and animals have to teach late modern Green politics and animal rights movements? There is a new organicism, vitalism and ideas of interconnectedness between nature and culture, humans and their environment, networks and nodes, that promises new forms of interdisciplinarity between the sciences and the humanities outside or ‘after’ the humanist tradition, producing new, posthuman(ist) forms of subjectivity. To what extent can the beginning of modernity and humanism be helpful in making choices for us who find ourselves at the other end of five hundred years of modernity and humanism? Again, the notion of retrofitting seems appropriate here:

> Shakespeare’s plays show an abiding interest in what we now identify as positive-negative-feedback loops, cellular structures, the uses and abuses of analogies between natural and social order, and in the available models for community. Characters in Shakespeare display an interest in aspects of this natural world that are relevant for us, and if we take that interest seriously we find that there is nothing childlike or naïve about their concerns.[102]

In analogy with the indeterminacy of nature and culture in early modern times, there is also a “space of ontological indeterminacy” between humans and animals, as Bruce Boehrer put it.[103] It is worth studying the “distinctions between human and animal nature”, which are “central to western cultural organization (…), help to license particular forms of material and economic relations to the natural world; (…) help to suggest and reinforce parallel social distinctions on the levels of gender, ethnicity, race, and so on” historically,[104] but it is also necessary to draw parallels with contemporary forms of anthropomorphism, anthropocentism and speciesism. In *Perceiving Animals* (2000), Erica Fudge argued for this kind of continuity, this retrofitting of early modern and late modern speciesism. The “degradation of humanity in the face of the beast in early modern thought is a recurring theme", she explained;[105] but anthropomorphism allows for both, sentimental humanisation of animals and animalisation of humans. If this mutual dependence of the violent and speciesist process of 'becoming human' and 'becoming animal' is a major concern in early modern culture and in early modern humanism, then it increasingly comes back to haunt a late modern, posthumanist culture, in which the boundaries between human and animal (like in fact all the boundaries between humans and their various related significant others, which have played and continue to play a role in the process of shoring up and guaranteeing the humanity of the human: the monster, the machine etc.) once again, this time through bio- and other technologies, have become, to use Donna Haraway's word, "leaky".[106] "Thinking with animals" becomes thus a major task, since "ignoring the presence of animals in the past [as in the present or the future one might add] is ignoring a significant feature of human life".[107] Nonhuman animals do have agency within human culture, and they can also be subjects: "humans cannot think about themselves – their cultures, societies, and political structures – without recognizing the importance of nonhumans to themselves, their cultures, societies, and political structures".[108] Reading Shakespeare alongside CPH therefore also means sharing in this "dislocation of the human" brought about by the return of its nonhuman others and the possible parallel between the challenges to early modern and late modern humanism, where, as Donna Haraway famously put it in her "Manifesto for Cyborgs" in 1985, the boundaries between human and animal, and human and machine have been thoroughly breached.[109]

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[101] Gabriel Egan, *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 1.
[102] *Ibid*., p. 50.
[103] Bruce Boehrer, *Shakespeare Among the Animals: Nature and Society in the Drama of Early Modern England* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002), p. 1.
[104] *Ibid*., p. 3.

We Have Never Been Human

CPH thus opens up several lines of questioning for Shakespeare studies (and literary studies more generally): what would it mean to read Shakespeare no longer 'as' humanist – neither as a humanist author nor from a humanist (reader's) standpoint? Who, in fact, is the 'real' posthumanist, Shakespeare or 'we'? Two humanisms are here in fact in doubt – Shakespeare's and ours. Doubting, after a period of prolonged theoretical antihumanism, can mean several things: on the one hand, it can simply be a rather stubborn confirmation of humanism, a return to 'common sense' in post-theoretical times (cf. Bloom, Wells). It can also lead to a revaluation of humanism, in the form of a critical return to and an affirmation of the radical potential within humanism itself (cf. Said, Mousley). But it may also be understood as an attempt to read Shakespeare through all sorts of figurations of the 'inhuman' (either in their late modern, technological forms, like cyborgs, machines, computers etc., or in their more timeless, even premodern or 'amodern' appearances, like ghosts, monsters, animals, etc.). Finally, CPH can also work its way back to Shakespeare and construct genealogies between his work and a perceived or real current shift away from a humanist knowledge paradigm, the possible advent of a new ‘episteme’, in which the human again becomes a radically open category, for the promise of a postanthropocentric, posthumanist future.

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[105] Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), p. 10.

[106] Cf. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century [1985]", in: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 152.

[107] Erica Fudge, ed., *Renaissance Beasts: Of Animals, Humans, and Other Wonderful Creatures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 3.

[108] *Ibid*., p. 4.

[109] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", p. 151.

2 The Invention of the Posthuman in *The Merchant of Venice* – "…a passion so strange, outrageous, and so variable…"

When Did We Become Posthuman?

Historically speaking, there is uncertainty if and when posthumanism started or when we became posthuman.[110] Conceptually, however, it is quite inevitable that with the 'invention of the human' the posthuman as one of his or her 'others' also becomes thinkable, representable, possible, etc. As soon as some form of *humanitas* begins to characterise the species as a whole, nonhuman (un-, in-, pre- or posthuman) others start proliferating and the process of inclusion, exclusion and differentiation is set in motion.[111]

Shakespeare, given his central position within early modern Western culture at the beginning of roughly five hundred years of humanism, can be used as an important illustration in this context. Harold Bloom's monumental study *Shakespeare – The Invention of the Human* (1998) insists on the centrality of Shakespeare's position in the universal 'humanist' canon, which transcends individual national literatures through the creation of essentially 'human' characters like Rosalind, Shylock, Iago, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra, and in particular Falstaff and Hamlet, who represent the "the invention of the human, the inauguration of personality as we have come to recognize it".[112] "The idea of Western character, of the self as a moral agent, has many sources: Homer and Plato, Aristotle and Sophocles, the Bible and Augustine, Dante and Kant, and all you might care to add. Personality, in our sense, is a Shakespearean invention, and is not only Shakespeare's greatest originality but also the authentic cause of his perpetual pervasiveness".[113] For Bloom, Shakespeare's importance does not so much lie in his central cultural aesthetic or social historical meaning but in his 'ingenious' creation of universal truths and profound spiritual and sublime, in short, in his authentic 'humanity': "Our ideas as to what makes the self authentically human owe more to Shakespeare than ought to be possible".[114] Bloom's insistent and almost 'dogged' liberal humanism represents of course the main target of the kind of constructivist or anti-essentialist antihumanism that characterises new historicism and cultural materialism (especially, in the work of Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Dollimore, Terence Hawkes or Catherine Belsey). As a result of the politicisation of Shakespeare studies in the last few decades Shakespeare is usually afforded an 'ambivalent' attitude towards rising and consolidating early modern humanist ideologies and modern anthropocentrism (cf. the discussion about 'subversion' and 'containment', which, from a cultural political point of view, are always 'present' as two characteristic moments in Shakespeare's plays).[115] This ambivalence is then 'resolved' by both camps – the defenders of liberal humanism like Bloom or Brian Vickers, on the one hand, and champions of antihumanist materialism, on the other – and used for the respective ideological purposes. On one side we have the Marxist-materialist critique of capitalist modernity, which targets alienation and individualism as the main evils of liberal humanism, whereas on the other side, from a formal aestheticist point of view, Shakespeare is reclaimed as a monument of essential humanity and humanist cultural achievement.

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[110] N. Katherine Hayles's account of *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) centres on the history of cybernetics and its main metaphor, information, with its associated "belief that information can circulate unchanged among different material substrates" (p. 1). Hayles traces this history throughout roughly the twentieth century by distinguishing three stages: "how information lost its body (…) how the cyborg was created as technological artefact and cultural icon (…) and how the human is giving way to a different construction called the posthuman" (p. 2). It is my claim here that this late twentieth/early twenty-first-century transformation from human to poshuman via (information) technology needs to be historically challenged and recontextualised.

[111] Like any other invention, the invention of the human would follow the logic analysed by Jacques Derrida in "Psyche: Inventions of the Other", trans. Catherine Porter, in: Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich, eds., *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 25-65. It would be impossible to give a short summary of what is a very complex and multilayered argument in Derrida's essay. The fundamental 'aporia' at the heart of the 'invention of the new' is that it happens within an essential or 'structural' double bind of impossibility and necessity. For an invention to be 'new' it needs to happen outside the horizon of subjectivity. On the other hand, for an invention to be recognised and legitimated as such it needs an inventing subject (an 'author'). This is why, strictly speaking a radically new invention would only be possible as an 'invention of the other'. However, the fundamental undecidability remains: is the other 'invented' (for example the inhuman by the human)? Or does the invention in fact come from the unknowable other (is the human the 'effect' of a 'repressed' and 'older' form of alterity)? There is no way to decide. However, Derrida in this essay and throughout his work, shows that this undecidability underlies *and* threatens the entire history of metaphysical humanism. The present essay therefore uses the phrase 'invention of the inhuman' in a 'deconstructive' sense to refer to the possibility of an entirely different, i.e. 'posthumanist', understanding of the human even 'before' his/her/its 'invention'.

[112] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), p. 4.

Jonathan Dollimore in his commentary placed this caricature of an opposition into a longer historical and theoretical context. Neither Shakespeare's invoked universal humanity, nor his or early modernity's subversive radicality, neither the liberal humanist, individual genius, nor the proto-postmodern decentred subject of theory offer the entire truth, because:

> The crisis of subjectivity was there at the inception of individualism in early Christianity, and has been as enabling as it has been disturbing (enabling because disturbing). In other words, what we might now call the neurosis, anxiety and alienation of the subject-in-crisis are not so much the consequence of its recent breakdown, but the very stuff of its creation, and of the culture – Western European culture – from which it is inseparable, especially that culture in its most expansionist phases (of which the 'Renaissance' was undoubtedly one). The crisis of the self isn't so much the subjective counterpart of the demise, disintegration or undermining of Western European culture, as what has always energised both the self and that culture (…) what we are living through now is not some (post-)modern collapse of Western subjectivity but another mutation in its enduring dynamic.[116]

This latest mutation could therefore without doubt be referred to as 'posthuman' or at least 'posthumanist subjectivity' – a new form of humanist identity in posthumanist clothes that calls forth our vigilance and skepticism. In the third edition of Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy* (2005), he gives his preliminary verdict on the outcome of the so-called 'culture wars' of the

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[113] *Ibid*.

[114] *Ibid*., p. 17.

[115] Cf. Jonathan Dollimore, "Introduction: Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism", in: Dollimore and Anlan Sinfield, eds. *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 10ff.

[116] Jonathan Dollimore, "Shakespeare and Theory", in: Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin, eds., *Post-colonial Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 271.

1980s and 1990s that his book in many ways helped to spark: "*Radical Tragedy*, first published in 1984, attacked just these ideas: essentialism in relation to subjectivity, universalism in relation to the human, and the belief that there was an ethical/aesthetic realm transcending the political".[117] While the decentering of the subject and of universalism in late-capitalist society have become the everyday experience of our posthuman(ist) selves, "aesthetic humanism", as Dollimore calls it, continues to survive in its commodified form, and, curiously so, as a kind of spiritualising force. The conviction that art, literature and culture function as a humanising force is (still) the foundation of the cultural industries as well as all educational institutions. However, Dollimore criticises this attitude as rather 'complacent': "Far from being liberating, the humanist aesthetic has become a way of standing still amidst the obsolete, complacent and self-serving clichés of the heritage culture industry, the Arts establishment, and a market-driven humanities education system. The aesthetic has become an anaesthetic".[118]

This can of course not be the space to discuss the potential transformation of the traditional 'humanities' into, for want of a better word, 'posthumanities' departments of the future; however, what Dollimore's analysis makes clear is that in the age of the exposed crisis of humanist education there is no way back for theory and criticism, but also no clear-cut trajectory forward into some posthuman(ist) utopia – a position that Neil Badmington, with reference to Elaine Graham's work, called "oblique": "a 'critical post/humanism' must actively oblique the order of things, Humanism must be obliqued, knocked sideways, pushed off course, declined".[119] The oblique between 'post' and 'human' (post/human) proposed by Graham mainly served to gain time and to create a critical space for a more thorough deconstruction of humanism, without which an uncritical reinscription of humanist ideology into posthuman(ist) forms would be inescapable. In fact, the liberal humanist and the Marxist antihumanist can be seen to compete for the same moral authority over so-called human 'nature'. More recent approaches within literary criticism are certainly not immune towards this anthropocentric blindspot, even or maybe because they pose as posthumanist engagements with the latest 'scientific' insights, for example by promoting a so-called 'cognitive turn'. One could take Robin Headlam Wells's *Shakespeare's Humanism* (2005) as an example, which takes a biological-cum-cognitive starting point in its attempt to 'transcend' the opposition between pro- and antihumanists: "Where 'humanity' was once seen as a purely cultural construct, a consensus is now emerging among psychologists and neuroscientists that our minds are the product of a complex interaction between genetically determined predispositions and an environment that has itself been shaped by generations of human culture".[120] Wells uses the idea of co-evolution of genes and culture to reposition the question about human nature as central within Shakespeare's work, in the hope that "by listening to what other disciplines have to say about human nature, criticism can move on from an outdated anti-humanism that has its intellectual roots in the early decades of the last century to a more informed modern understanding of the human universals that literature has, in Ian McEwan's words, 'always, knowingly and helplessly, given voice to'".[121] The rhetoric of

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[117] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd ed. (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004), p. xv.

[118] *Ibid*., p. xxii.

[119] Neil Badmington, "Post, Oblique, Human", *Theory and Society* 10.2 (2004): 63.

[120] Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 2.

[121] *Ibid*., p. 5.

‘departure’ and ‘overcoming’ makes clear that one cannot simply write off humanism that easily. On the contrary, humanism with all its essentialist values relating to some mystical form of human ‘nature’, is being reinscribed with the help of cognitive and neuroscientific concepts – supposedly ever-changing yet ever true to itself.

A critical posthumanism (CPH) thus needs to overcome the ideological confrontation between liberal humanists and cultural materialists mindful of both the historical context and current cultural change. In terms of Shakespeare studies this means situating Shakespeare’s work formally and historically at a certain turning point within the process of ‘post/humanisation’ – a process that already contains its own mechanisms of repression and exclusion and thus already inscribes its own demise and end. So, just as Shakespeare might be the possible starting point of a certain humanism he could also already anticipate its decline and ultimate ruin. A critical perlaboration of Shakespearean humanism should thus open up the possibility of a fundamentally different, more ‘radical’ understanding of ‘humanity’. Recalling Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” – in which Haraway hints at the permeability of the boundries between human and animal and between humans and machines at the end of the twentieth century – Fudge, Gilbert and Wiseman[122] explain that the early modern period provides other and much earlier problematising accounts of humanness and humanism. The spreading of humanist and anthopocentric ideologies during the renaissance and early modern period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries does not happen without tensions, contradictions and resistance. There is no immediate consensus about what constitutes some imaginary ‘human nature’. This alone should be reason enough to abandon the simplistic idea of a monolithic (Eurocentic) humanism which might today be challenged by one, (global or globalised) form of posthumanism. Instead CPH needs to link back to those critical discourses that run within and alongside the humanist tradition. The contributions in Fudge, Gilbert and Wiseman provide some clarification in this respect by pointing out moments of ambivalence in the early modern relationship to animals, machines, the rise of the natural sciences, cartography, sexuality, new concepts of the body and embodiment, and modern medicine. Jonathan Sawday, in particular, in his essay “Renaissance Cyborg”, emphasises that body modification is not the privilege of our own, contemporary, period: “Enhancing or altering the body form artificially, whether through adornment – tattoos, cosmetics, padded shoulders, bustles, cod-pieces, wigs – or through more invasive procedures – silicone implants, surgical modification, scarification, the piercing of ears, lips, and other features – may be traced through a bewildering variety of cultural and historical moments”.[123] Sawday illustrates this ambiguity by referring to a literary example, Shakespeare’s Coriolanus and his progressing ‘mechanisation’ during the course of the play, which corresponds to the more general mechanisation of nature especially after Descartes: “When did we first begin to fear our machines?”, Sawday asks. “Certainly, by the end of the seventeenth century, the dominance of the mechanistic model within European modes of understanding had become unassailable. The world, human society, the human and animal body, all could be analysed in terms of the functioning of machinery”.[124]

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[122] Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert and Susan Wiseman, eds., *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002).

[123] Jonathan Sawday, “Renaissance Cyborg”, in: Fudge, Gilbert und Wiseman, eds., p. 172.

[124] *Ibid*., p. 190. While Coriolanus’s gradual ‘mechanisation’ is an essential aspect of his tragic downfall, there is also a very strong link to comedy and laughter in ‘becoming machinic’. The key reference here is Henri Bergson’s *Le Rire – essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1910 [first 1900]). Bergson’s famous definition of the comical – “*du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant*” (p. 39), a certain

Haraway's 'cyborgisation' of the human can thus be seen to start at the same time as the rise of humanism and actually becomes an integral part of it. Without its ideological and philosophical anticipation the idea of cyborgisation, literally, would have been unthinkable. As much as the metaphor of mechanisation of nature and of the human and human behaviour allows for greater 'scientific' control over the environment by humans (and machines), it also provokes the unease towards this new and self-produced and self-producing other which threatens to become an indispensible instrument of identification and delimitation and thus to erode the very core of this newly created humanity:

> The modern human relationship with machines, from its emergence in the earlier part of the sixteenth century down to the present, has always been tinged with a measure of unease. 'They' have always been nearer kin to 'us' than we have cared to admit; and in that lies their fascination, as well as their potential horror. It is an uncomfortable prospect that what it is to be human may be defined by 'forms such as never were in nature'.[125]

In a similar move, Rhodes and Sawday, in *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print*, argued for an anticipation of contemporary information and media society in the early modern period. Almost in analogy with the temporal mode I proposed for posthumanism and the 'invention of the posthuman', Rhodes and Sawday describe a form of 'remediation' when they claim that "[t]he experience of our own new technology has enabled us to re-imagine the impact of new technologies in the past".[126]

Shylock's Humanism

Shakespeare's 'invention of the human' thus implies the invention of the posthuman. A case in point is Shylock, the Jew, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1600). Bloom's classic interpretation of this profoundly ambivalent character of an all-too-human and at the same time constantly dehumanised villain can serve as emblematic of a humanist, as opposed to a critically posthumanist, understanding of the human. The central question in this context concerns the antisemitism of the play, as Bloom explains in the opening of his chapter on *The Merchant*: "One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work".[127] Humanists nevertheless venture either to defend Shakespeare against the accusation of antisemitism (e.g. in arguing that the text is not antisemitist but simply, at worst, ironically and critically reflects a rampant and popular Elizabethan antisemitism, which not only saves, but even ennobles, Shakespeare as an author not of, but in his time), or they attempt to 'humanise' Shylock by characterising him as a largely sympathetic figure and thus

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mechanicity and inflexibility ("*raideur*") that covers the life-force (which, for the vitalist Bergson, is elasticity itself). A prime example of the comic dimension of increasing mechanisation of a character in Shakespeare – or a kind of early modern form of 'cyborgisation' – is Shylock, whose discourse throughout acts 3 and 4 becomes increasingly repetitive, 'stubborn' and 'literal' (cf. below).

[125] Sawday, in Fudge, Gilbert and Wiseman, eds., p. 191.

[126] Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday, eds., *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge and Technology in the First Age of Print* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 2.

[127] Bloom, *Shakespeare*, p. 171.

willfully misunderstand the text. Bloom is aware of this contradiction and blames the ambivalence in Shakespeare's text on the rivalry between Shakespeare's "arch Jew" and Marlowe's Barabas, in *The Jew of Malta* (1590). How else explain Shylock's bizarre cruelty and his thirst for Antonio's pound of flesh? "Shylock simply does not fit his role; he is the wrong Jew in the right play".[128] What Bloom is missing in Shylock is the typical Shakespearean sceptical irony. Instead, Shylock impresses through his linguistic precision and expressivity, which constitutes another 'contradiciton' at the heart of this social outcast – a contradiction which many modern and contemporary stagings have tried to 'even out' by giving Shylock a heavy 'foreign' accent.[129]

Bloom tries to make a Shakespearean virtue out of Shylock's 'vividness' and his extraodinary (human) realism in the face of the barbaric and comic evil he represents, by interpreting Shylock as an example of the fascinating multidimensional character of human nature. Shylock is thus seen to shake 'our' fundamental and universal belief in human goodness and confronts them with 'our' racist, sexist and religious prejudice. Shylock simply is both, a comic villain and the embodiment of tragic and embattled humanity. In this respect, his final conversion to Christianity must represent a sadistic act of revenge by Antonio. The other main characters of the play also do not escape this interpretation without at least some blame. Antonio is just as curious an outsider as is Shylock. In addition, Antonio seems to entertain a homoerotically tinged relationship with his friend and 'impoverished playboy', Bassanio. He suffers from the latter's betrayal, namely his decision to woo the rich heiress Portia, to pay off his debtors; however, first Bassanio needs another cash injection from Antonio which, in turn, leads to the whole credit and 'pound of flesh' episode. This part of the story is driven by Shylock's hatred of Antonio who has spat at him in public and dehumanised him by calling him a 'dog'. Portia, on the other hand, who might even be seen as the real main character of the play, displays some degree of frivolousness in her noble and rather romantic Belmont, while acting rather cunningly and implacably as a dressed-up judge in court. She tricks Shylock who is rather obstinate in his literal interpretation of the bond and she has no hestitation to completely reverse the situation by exposing Shylock to ridicule, destitution, capital punishment and ultimately to public humiliation and violence in the form of an imposed conversion to Christianity. Thus it is not only Shylock who is characterised by his human, all-too-human, contradiction but the entire play plays with 'our' trust in the 'Christian' understanding of 'humanity'. Shakespeare's ambivalence, Bloom believes, "diverts self-hatred into hatred of the other, and associates the other with lost possibilities of the self".[130] And this is where ultimately Shakespeare's 'invention of the human' is located for Bloom, namely in the moral injunction that, in the name of universal humanity, we should not 'dehumanise' ourselves by giving in to our self-hatred or hatred of the other based on a projection of difference and alterity. It is probably also in this sense that Bloom's rather speculative concluding statement needs to be understood: "I close by wondering if Shylock did not cause Shakespeare more discomfort than we now apprehend", for "the playright, capacious soul, would be aware that the gratuitous outrage of a forced conversion to Venetian Christianity surpasses all boundaries of decency". [131] Mission accomplished, one could say: 'man', in standing up to his very own inhumanity, has been 'rehumanised' and, emblematically, in the figure of the Shakespearean genius, has been extracted at least temporarily from the evil mechanism of self-hatred and hatred of the other, and has thus been reinserted into the anthropophile sphere of humanistic self-elevation – court adjourned – until the next humanist crisis. As last reassurance, Bloom's final verdict is: "Shakespeare was [merely] up to mischief".[132]

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[128] *Ibid*., p. 172.

[129] It would indeed be interesting to read Shylock's Venetian 'language memoir' and compare it to Derrida's 'Franco-Maghrebian' experience in France, in *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), particularly the remarks on the forceful loss of accent and the idea of "hyperbolic purity" (pp. 45-48) Derrida associates with "enter[ing] French literature". While Derrida's 'monolingualism of the other' refers to a total surrender of 'one's own' language as to that of the other, Shylock seems to speak the language of the other 'as if it was his', which, arguably, leads to his defeat, by language (cf. below).

[130] Bloom, *Shakespeare*, p. 190.

A completely different, namely posthumanist, way of reading is possible, however. In order to demonstrate this alternative, however, let us first look at Catherine Belsey's essay "Cultural Difference as Conundrum in *The Merchant of Venice*" in her *Why Shakespeare?*, as an example of poststructuralist 'antihumanism' with its undeniable merits but also limitations. In a by now classic move, Belsey shifts the ambivalence of the play onto its linguistic plane and characterises it as "a play that depends so extensively on the instability of meaning and the duplicity of the signifier",[133] which to a large extent is expressed in Shylock's stubborn 'literalness' during the court scene, as far as the bond is concerned. It is this literalness that will be 'outdone' by Portia, in the court scene, in order to 'undo' Shylock. Unlike Bloom and other humanist interpreters, who see this ambivalence as a pedagogical 'task', or as a moral 'admonition' to the reader or spectator, namely to acknowledge and understand their own human nature, Belsey reads it in a deconstructionist vein, namely as an impossible structural necessity of the play and its cultural context: "A prejudice conventional in its own period goes into the composition of *Merchant of Venice*. At the same time, the play includes elements that radically unsettle the prejudice it produces. *It differs from itself*".[134] A central role is played by the contradiction between the untouchable and general nature of the law, on the one hand, and its necessarily linguistic interpretation, on the other – a point that Derrida makes as well in a similar form, in his reading of the play.[135] Belsey formulates the dilemma as follows:

> How, in other words, can the law be just to both Antonio and Shylock? And the answer, of course, is a quibble: flesh is not blood; a pound is not a jot more or less than a pound. Nowhere is the duplicity of the signifier thrown into clearer relief than in this exposure of the moneylender's worthless bond. Shylock's ultimate antagonist is the language in which his contract with Antonio is necessarily formulated – and he loses.[136]

The law is necessarily expressed in language ("inscribed in the signifier"); language, however has its own dynamic and is "anarchic".[137] At this point, however, something very interesting happens in Belsey's reading, which, despite all its best intentions, and absolutely consistent antihumanist conclusions, finds itself drawn back into Bloom's dialectic of de- and rehumanisation as described above. Belsey uses Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other*, in which he speaks about his forced exile from his 'own' and his 'only' native language, French.

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[131] *Ibid.*, p. 191.

[132] *Ibid.*

[133] Catherine Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007), p. 160.

[134] *Ibid.*, p. 161.

[135] Jacques Derrida, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?" Trans. Lawrence Venuti, *Critical Inquiry* 27.2 (2001): 174-200.

[136] Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?*, p. 162.

[137] *Ibid.*, p. 164.

Being an Algerian Jew under the protectorate of the Vichy regime is described by Derrida in the form of the following 'aporia': "I have only one language; it is not mine".[138] Belsey uses this to come to a general, almost existential, maybe even 'humanitarian' insight: "we none of 'us' own the language we speak, which was already there when we came into the world (…). In this sense, we are all aliens, all in exile from a state of perfect correspondence between what we want to say, or would want to say if only we knew what it was, and the signifying practices available to us". [139] However, what this disarming, almost humanist-existentialist, 'universalism' necessarily downplays is that not all forms of lingustic exile are equivalent. Instead, and this is one of Derrida's main arguments in *Monolingualism*, every linguistic exile depends on a culturally specific power struggle between individuals and institutions, which attempt to control and establish a monopoly over the fixation of meaning and claim 'ownership' of language. Shylock becomes implicated within such a power struggle and as an outsider is duly stigmatised. He is stripped of 'his' language (which even more than in Derrida's sense is not his 'own') and is punished for his cultural difference to safeguard the imaginary homogeneity of Christian society and Venetian law. [140]

The strategy that Belsey uses to 'save' Shakespeare from his 'own' contemporary culture and its anti-semitist racism seems ultimately, despite or maybe because of its diametrical opposition to Bloom's 'liberal humanism', as humanistically and universalistically motivated as Bloom: "How surprising, then that the play invests its fantasy-Jew with humanity. It is for this reason, however, that *The Merchant of Venice* does not just reaffirm prejudice, but draws attention to it".[141] If Shakespeare's text itself undermines or even 'deconstructs' the idea of a culturally homogenous identity it can be used as an early modern testimony against any exclusivity in the process of identity construction at any time in history. Belsey's reading consequently does not fail to engage in a critique of contemporary multiculturalism, at the same time as it justifies the ongoing interest in Shakespeare as a thinker of great humanitarian and existential questions ("the reason why Shakespeare's play continues to haunt the imagination of the West"): "can a society preserve cultural difference and at the same time do away with social antagonism?"[142] In relation to the contemporary, and especially the Anglo-American, cultural context, the question arises in the following *historically and culturally specific* form, despite its tacit universal assumptions: "While enforced integration generates a justified resentment, our own well-meaning multiculturalism may inadvertently foster precisely the segregation, and thus the hostility, it was designed to prevent".[143] The similarity of the procedure with that of Bloom's 'liberal humanism' in this context is striking. The play opens onto the 'abyss' of inhumanity, projected onto the outsider who, in turn, exposes the inhumanity of the entire society of humans. The same dialectic of self-hatred, hatred of the other and cultural improvement that constitutes the humanist ideology ironically appears to be at work in Belsey's reading as well. My argument would be that, as long as this dialectic is not questioned a critical posthumanist angle remains invisible.

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[138] Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other,* p. 15.

[139] Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?*, p. 163.

[140] For Derrida, in fact, *The Merchant of Venice* is 'the play of translation' as such. In "What Is a Relevant Translation?" Derrida says: "everything in the play can be retranslated into the code of translation and as a problem of translation (…). At every moment, translation is as necessary as it is impossible. It is the law; it even speaks the language of the law beyond the law, of the impossible law, represented by a woman who is disguised, transfigured, converted, travestied, read *translated*, into a man of the law. As if the subject of this play were, in short, the task of the translator, his impossible task, his duty, his debt, as inflexible as it is unpayable" (p. 183). It could be said that it is Portia, disguised as Balthazar, who plays the role of the inventor of the posthuman as and within the law, and who "sets into motion the *difference* of the other" (Derrida, "Psyche: Inventions of the Other", p. 61). The law, coded in one specific language, has always already had to 'translate' justice – a 'madness' or injustice at the very heart of the law (and language; cf. Derrida, *Monolingualism*, p. 10) that affects both the Christians in Venice and Shylock, the Jew, however, in very different ways, of course.

[141] Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?*, p. 167.

[142] *Ibid*., p. 168.

The Merchant of Venice*: Posthumanism and Misanthropy*

Let me therefore briefly return to the 'essence' of humanity and look again at Shylock's famous speech in act 3.1, a speech provoked by his previous personal and no doubt traumatic loss of his only daughter, Jessica, and Salarino's mocking reminder of her elopement. Shylock concludes his 'humanity speech' with the words: "The villany you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction".[144] Nothing, in fact, is more effective in unhinging humanism than this phrase, because the dialectic of similarity and difference is here at its turning point. The projected inhumanity, the repressed self-hatred returns, following the basic psychoanalytical logic of the repressed's return, and it begins to haunt the provisionally stabilised self, threatens it and causes it to repress afresh – which could be used to explain to what extent the escalation of inhumanity is an essential aspect of humanity itself, maybe even its engine, drive or 'telos'. The 'humanisation' of history hides its own dehumanising logic. CPH can therefore not simply break with this logic because that would merely constitute a continuation of the escalating dialectic of humanisation and dehumanisation. Instead it is a question of a deconstructive 'working through' of humanism's represseds, of the inhuman and unhuman, in a radically different sense.

Scott Brewster already summarised this point in his introduction to *Inhuman Reflections: Thinking the Limits of the Human*:

> the inhuman is unsatisfactorily configured as somehow 'post' or as a mere *limen* or threshold, much less a crossing of the boundary. Rather it retains a sense of excess (plural potentiality) which continues to disseminate as it always has done and fulfilled an unfulfillable within the continuing 'technical mediation' of the human.[145]

This techn(olog)ical mediation of the human, which has to be taken into account in any critical genealogy of the inhuman or the posthuman, testifies to the fact that any 'becoming-machine' (i.e. cyborgisation as one, predominantly contemporary, form of posthumanisation) is always already a constitutive factor of being human and connected necessarily with an 'originary technicity'.[146]

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[143] *Ibid*.

[144] *The Merchant of Venice* 3.1.56-57, used edition: *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, ed. M.M.Mahood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 110.

[145] Scott Brewster et al., eds., *Inhuman Reflections: Thinking the Limits of the Human* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 9.

[146] On Derrida's notion of 'originary technicity' see Arthur Bradley, *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2011).

Let me stress again that the prefix 'post-' in posthumanism can have a variety of meanings and that it allows for a number of discursive and argumentative strategies. Neither in terms of conent nor as far as strategic usage is concerned do the terms 'posthuman', 'posthumanity' and 'posthumanisation' presuppose any consensus. These terms are politically, radically open, which is the fact that gives rise to the demand for a *critical* posthumanism in the first place – a CPH that takes the issue of the posthuman seriously and problematises, contextualises and historicises it, at the same time.

In this respect I am at least in partial agreement with Halliwell and Mousley's approach in *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues*, which proposed to do justice to the complexity of humanism in its many disguises. Halliwell and Mousley distinguish between a romantic, existentialist, dialogic, civic, spiritual, secular, pragmatic and a technological humanism, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, they also subdivide antihumanism, as a reaction against each of these humanisms, into three phases. The first of these phases lasted from the mid 19th to the beginning of the 20th century and contained important antihumanist precursors like Darwin, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Saussure and Weber, who all engaged in a critique of anthropocentric metaphysics. The second phase of the 1960s and 1970s was that of the antihumanists proper (Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard and Lacan), which led, finally, within the postmodern context of the 1970s and 1980s, to the third generation of antihumanism in the form of its popularisation. Among the proponents of the third phase Halliwell and Mousley include figures like Catherine Belsey, Geoffrey Bennington, Terence Hawkes, Christopher Norris, Peggy Kamuf, J. Hillis Miller and Paul Rabinow, who exposed the 'cardinal sins' of 'Western metaphysics': logocentrism, phallocentrism and anthropocentrism. As antidotes they propose the decentering of language, the subject and the liberal humanist world picture in general. Despite the curious anglocentrism of Halliwell and Mousley's genealogy, their approach successfully problematises the monolithic view of humanism by locating a radical self-criticism already within the humanist tradition and, on this basis, by arguing for a non-normative, "post-foundational" humanism "that refuses to define the human" and thus escapes the "tyranny of naming and quantifying the human".[147] Against the 'reduction' of the human in the age of hypermodern, late capitalism, so-called 'high theory' and the endless 'plasticity of the human' Halliwell and Mousley propose a "grounded humanism" which opposes "alienation, depersonalisation and degradation" of the human and humanity.[148] Despite Halliwell and Mousley's humanitarian reflex, however, it seems unlikely that the contemporary techno-savvy posthumanisation will have a lot of patience for such an attempt at rehumanising. This is why my standpoint implies a kind of 'alterhumanism', rather than a rehumanisation, as antidote for some of the undeniably dehumanising tendencies within posthumanisation. However, projecting the inhumanity onto the 'system' in order to preserve the principle of human(istic) freedom seems an illusion since 'human' and 'system' are thoroughly interrelated – humans create systems, which then 'reproduce' or form humans as subjects or actors to guarantee the continuity of that system.[149]

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[147] Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley, *Critical Humanisms: Humanist? Anti-Humanist Dialogues* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), pp. 9-10.

[148] *Ibid*.

[149] Jean-François Lyotard makes a similar distinction in the introduction to his *The Inhuman: Reflections of Time* [1988], trans. Geoff Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

One has no choice but face the prospect of posthumanism if one is serious about a critique of humanism and anthropocentrism without giving in to the rehumanisation reflex, which does not really seem prepared to question humanist foundations. This might be particularly relevant for postcolonial circles and the discussion about how best to deal with ethnic difference and modern racism. The particular concern is that the dissolution of a universalist notion of humanity would foster a rerturn of old racisms in new form. As justified as this concern might be, it cannot lead to a renewal of a leftist radical humanism in the name of a Kantian cosmopolitan tradition as, for example, advocated by John Sanbonmatsu, who argues for, what he calls, 'metahumanism':

> With the arrival of post-humanism we may fast be approaching the zero hour of the critical tradition. With the subject as such now placed *sous rature* (under erasure), but this time not merely by clever critics but by scientists who *literally* manipulate the stuff our dreams of ourselves are made of, even the poststructuralist project self-destructs, as deconstruction is rendered irrelevant by the *fragmentation* of the ontological unity *Dasein*. This may seem a trivial point, but critical theory is already dangerously in collusion with the final obliteration of all things 'human' by capital (...). Post-humanism will have to be met forthrightly – with a return to ontology and the grounding of thought in a meaningful account of human being.[150]

A lot could be said about the problematic reference to Prospero in defence of 'metahumanism'. Indeed, it would be quite wrong to idealise humanist universalism for the reasons outlined above. The universalist ideal of a common and irreducible humanity that underlies, for example, the legitimation of any legislation against crimes against humanity has not succeeded in addressing the radical dehumanisation underlying the entire history of colonialism and its current legacy of global migration and multiculturalism (this is Belsey's concern above). Neither has an essentialist notion of humanity prevented the Holocaust or other genocides since. In my view, the 'perversion' of inhumanity is part of the logic of humanism itself. This is why a deconstruction of the humanist tradition has never been more important than today, i.e. in the face of a continued transformation of the human and of the humanistic question as such: what exactly constitutes the humanity of the human? It is precisely the connection between continuity, break and remembering that powers the dialectical drive, within humanism, between dehumanisation and rehumanisation. Only a deconstruction of humanism in its current globalised and technocultural posthumanist form and phase can unhinge this dialectic play and may eventually expose and disrupt it, provoking an opening towards a radically different, nonhumanist, postanthropocentric view.

From its tender beginnings in Greek and Roman Antiquity, to its neoplatonist and Christian early Europeanisation, Renaissance anthropocentrism, the Enlightenment and industrial and rational Modernity, up to the antihumanist phase in the 19th and 20th century and the contemporary posthumanist age, that includes the radically utopian stance represented by transhumanists, humanism has always displayed a remarkable resistance and adaptability. It has overcome its theological and religious beginnings in the face of modern developments and challenges (science, evolution, psychoanalysis, existentialism, globalisation and technologisation) and has secularised (French Revolution), politicised (liberalism) and economised (capitalism) itself. In doing so it has prepetuated itself as ‘common sense’ on an international and arguably global level. In its name, wars have been and are being fought, as much as the world’s poor are being helped. Its educational values underlie the modern institution of schools and universities. Its aesthetic shores up globalised Western culture. Its moral values do not cease to inspire promethean historical accounts of human self-aggrandisement *and* of humility, of good and evil of which the human in all his or her splendour *and* misery is capable and between which he or she constantly has to choose in order to overcome the suffering and the mortality the human shares with all the individuals of the species (and indeed with all known other species). Who could be so unfeeling as to not be touched by humanism’s self-account of its ‘heroic’ battles. Nevertheless, it is precisely the humanistic self-indulgence and uncritical complacency that might drive a critical posthumanist towards some ‘strategic misanthropy’ – out of care for the human and a future of and for the human, including his or her natural and cultural environment, for “who can fail to realize that the trope of misanthropy is the hope of society”.[151] And this, after all, might also be the justification for calling Shakespeare a posthumanist *avant-la-lettre*.

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[150] John Sanbonmatsu, *The Postmodern Prince: Critical Theory, Left Strategy, and the Making of a New Political Subject* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), p. 207.

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[151] Daniel Cottom, *Unhuman Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 150.

3 Hamlet and Posthumanist Politics

> ...they imitated humanity so abominably... (*Hamlet*, III.2.36-37)[152]

> The century of 'Marxism' will have been that of the techno-scientific and effective decentering of the earth, of geopolitics, of the anthropos in its onto-theological identity or its genetic properties, of the ego cogito – and of the very concept of narcissism whose aporias are, let us say in order to go too quickly and save ourselves a lot of references, the explicit theme of deconstruction.[153]

Posthumanism and Politics

Another spectre has been haunting Europe, and the world at large: the spectre of the posthuman.[154] It is therefore no wonder that posthumanist manifestos have been proliferating. To cite only one of the earliest and most prominent, and only the first three of its many propositions:

> 1. It is now clear that humans are no longer the most important things in the universe. This is something the humanists have yet to accept.
> 2. All technological progress of human society is geared towards the transformation of the human species as we currently know it.
> 3. In the posthuman era many beliefs become redundant — not least the belief in human beings.[155]

In contrast to what may seem like a revival of a more or less unreflected futurism, Ivan Caullus and I have been arguing for a *critical* posthumanism (CPH) that remembers its humanist origins and returns to its prefigurations.[156] One of the prefigurations of contemporary posthumanism – an example of a 'proto-posthumanist moment' – we argued, can be located in Shakespeare and the early modern period in general.[157] Given the affinity between early and late modernity that has been well established by new historicism and cultural materialism,[158] and given Shakespeare's thoroughly ambiguous position vis-à-vis (Renaissance) humanism, one can assume an analogy between early or proto-postmodernism and early or proto-posthumanism.[159]

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[152] The edition of *Hamlet* used throughout is the Signet Classic Shakespeare, edited by Edward Hubler (New York: 1963), which is based on the Second Quarto.

[153] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 98 (hereafter quoted in the text as *SoM*).

[154] See Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "The Latecoming of the Posthuman, Or, Why 'We' Do the Apocalypse Differently, 'Now'", *Reconstruction* 4.3 (2004), n.p.

[155] Robert Pepperell, "The Posthumanist Manifesto", *Kritikos* 2 (2005), available online: http://intertheory.org/pepperell.htm (accessed 8/12/2023).

[156] Cf. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "Critical Posthumanism, or, the *Inventio* of a Posthumanism Without Technology", *Subject Matters* 3.2/4.1 (2007): 15-29.

[157] See Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, eds. *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2012).

[158] See for example Linda Charnes, *Hamlet's Heirs: Shakespeare and the Politics of a New Millennium* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

In short, if Shakespeare, in Harold Bloom's provocative words, is responsible for the "invention of the human"[160] – and Hamlet, the character, in this context, functions as the 'human' *par excellence*, or the essence of the essence, so to speak – Shakespeare by implication will also have to be credited with the invention of the posthuman,[161] i.e. his work, and *Hamlet* in particular, will have to be seen as a proliferation of nonhuman others who serve as foils for the human to understand 'himself' as human (i.e. 'not-woman', 'not-animal', 'not-machine', etc.). All these repressed others have the ability to return as 'ghosts' who, at the moment of crisis, come back to haunt the human. This ontological spectrality is thematised in *Hamlet* and therefore keeps resurfacing in modern readings of the play, since it coincides with the general spectrality and of modernity[162] and the spectral ontology (or 'hauntology') of (Western) metaphysics, in Derrida's words (*SoM*, p. 10 and *passim*).

This proto-postmodern and proto-posthumanist spectrality, epitomised in Hamlet's 'the time is out of joint', stands in analogy to Lyotard's understanding of the 'post' in the 'postmodern'. The specular reflections of the two respective threshold positions – early (or proto-) and late (or post-) modern or humanist – thus calls for a (Lyotardian) reading in "ana".[163] This reading also corresponds to the time of theory for which posthumanism and the posthuman are most certainly *revenants*. A time when the human is becoming 'his' own spectre, seemingly more 'enframed' by technology[164] than ever before – so much so that the human becomes the most 'unthinkable', and therefore, according to Heidegger, the most urgent task of or call for thinking[165] – this time, in fact, is a time that has been here before, as Derrida recalls in *Specters of Marx*:

> the end of philosophy, of 'the ends of man', of the 'last man' and so forth were, in the '50s, that is, forty years ago, our daily bread. We had this bread of apocalypse in our mouths naturally, already, just as naturally as that which I nicknamed after the fact, in 1980, the 'apocalyptic tone in philosophy'. (SoM, p. 14-15)[166]

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[159] See my, "Introduction – Shakespeare Ever After", in: *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, pp. 1-22 (reproduced in this volume as chapter 1, "Shakespeare and After").

[160] See Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999).

[161] See my "'a passion so strange, outrageous, and so variable': The Invention of the Inhuman in *The Merchant of Venice*", in: *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, pp.41-57 (reproduced in this volume as chapter 2, "The Invention of the Posthuman in *The Merchant of Venice*").

[162] See David Punter, *Modernity* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007).

[163] Jean-François Lyotard, "Note on the Meaning of 'Post-'", in: Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 47-50, and "Rewriting Modernity", in: *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 24-35.

[164] This is Heidegger's notion of the human being 'challenged forth' and 'enframed [*Gestell*]' by modern technology; see Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", in: *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 283-318.

[165] On the task of thinking the (unthinkable) see Martin Heidegger's "What Calls for Thinking?", in: *Basic Writings*, pp. 341-368.

[166] Derrida here criticises Francis Fukuyama's 'late coming' in his *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), by referring to the landmark collection *Les Fins de l'homme – à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida*, eds. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (Paris, Galilée, 1981),

Thus in dealing with the contemporary posthuman, we are facing a ghost of a ghost, which means that it is particularly important to go slow, and, like Horatio, to remember and be vigilant. The emergence of posthumanism after the often proclaimed and desired 'end of theory', indeed, calls for vigilance and a working through of theory's represseds. This is why – in taking the idea of posthumanism seriously, maybe even literally, or 'to the letter' – one will have to first readdress the 'antihumanism' of (poststructuralist) theory.

A return or repetition, then, but also, of course a novelty, a first and radical singularity. Few people will dispute that the label 'global technoscientific capitalism' adequately captures the condition of contemporary societies in the West. What may be somewhat more contentious is that the subjectivity and the dominant ideology of this global and globalising system have dramatically changed over the past decades. While the main target for critical and cultural theory from the late 1970s onwards has been the so-called 'liberal humanist subject', who could be interpellated as a 'free individual' and who from a governmental point of view would mainly function as a self-disciplined 'docile body' – a political analysis based on a radical antihumanism informed by both psychoanalysis and marxism (cf. Althusser, Lacan, Foucault – and grouped under the label 'poststructuralism') – the current phase of modernity calls for a somewhat different and more complex approach. All four aspects of the term global technoscientific capitalism require theory to refocus and change its political approach: the effects of globalisation (acceleration through space-time compression, postcolonialism, neoimperialism), high-tech (postindustrial hyperrationalisation, accelerated commodification, automation and 'cyborgisation'), science (global biopolitics through an alliance between the 'life sciences' and new bio, nano, cogno, neuro, info etc. technologies, all based on digitalisation), capitalism (global neoliberalism, marketisation, bureaucratisation, virtualisation of capital, realtime commercial transactions, the dominance of multinational corporations etc.) – all these developments no longer require or address a 'liberal humanist' subject as such. Increasingly, they do not address a human subject at all, since large areas of decision-making have been 'outsourced' to machines, programmes or data bases, while interaction between humans has become more and more techno-mediatised and digitalised (i.e. archived in digital code which can be instantly accessed, circulated and overwritten). As a result there is an immense disjuncture between individual self-perception (which largely continues to function according to (liberal) humanist values) and an ambient posthumanism, which largely serves the dehumanising agenda of the global system. In order to understand and adequately critique these changes antihumanism alone is no longer a very effective stance. What is needed is a political theory that continues to do justice to the original motivations behind theory's antihumanism (a politics of difference, an ethics of plurality etc.) while embracing the political challenges that the posthumanism of the system poses. This, in short, is at stake in a *critical* posthumanist politics.

The second note concerns the use of *Hamlet* in the context of such a posthumanist politics. Is not literature a hopelessly humanist undertaking and therefore inadequate as a cultural practice from which to derive a reinvigoration of theory as posthumanist critique? Does the global techno-posthuman have any track with the literary or even the 'literal', if not the 'lettered'? In fact, as I would argue, here lies the main reason why poststructuralism especially

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itself based on Derrida's essay in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), with the same title. See also our, "The Latecoming of the Posthuman…" (cf. note 3 above).

in its deconstructive mode continues to be relevant and might even become more so. The 'letter' was never really to be understood merely as *belles lettres*; literature was always more than this eminently humanist occupation, which experienced its institutionalisation thanks to the rise of the novel and the advent of a bourgeois reading public who needed a medium to celebrate their own values. This is, in fact, the good news, namely that the deconstructive notion of 'writing', even if it was never going to be contained by literary practices, applies to contexts and technologies that far outstretch the commonsensical notion of a human body sitting down at a desk with a pen and paper. On the other hand, since inscription processes happen increasingly at a supposedly 'immaterial', namely digital, virtual level, the technicity of the 'trace'[167] of writing threatens to enframe the human more dramatically than even Heidegger could foresee. So while it might be necessary to overcome the humanist notion of literature, it becomes even more important to reclaim literature's link with politics, as one, and maybe until recently the dominant, but by no means the only cultural and creative (fictional) practice closely connected to what might be called a 'radical imaginary'. Indeed, it might be necessary to recall literature's partaking in what could be called the fictional dynamic of the 'as if', of radical openness, of being or taking part in the arch-political discourse of human 'imagination'. And this would be the justification for using *Hamlet* as a starting point to analyse posthumanism and the need for a new politics. Hamlet, the character, has always been taken as the emblematic modern figure concerned with and somehow at odds with his own humanity. Here lie 'our' affinities with Hamlet – human agency forced to act without the benefit of secure knowledge, he is the ultimate *bricoleur*. While Hamlet sees the rise of modernity we might be witnessing its end – not knowing of course whether this end is already the beginning of something else or merely the end of something known; or, in other words, whether we come too early or too late for our 'posthuman' future. What certainly still pertains is that time is (still) 'out of joint' and has not ceased to be out of joint ever since Hamlet's beginning of modernity. Indeed, politics and action have become ever more 'spectral'. The other justification is of course that *Hamlet* is a play and as such has a specific affinity with politics and its 'theatricality' or 'staging' (cf. Samuel Weber).[168] All the world is a stage – in the age of globalisation this famous Shakespearean adage in a sense comes into its own, as politics is being played out on a 'world stage', while 'we', the Hamlets of our time (ever non-contemporaneous with our selves), are finding ourselves in a radically changed set. And we are discovering more every day that 'we' have been decentred not only as individual subjects but also as a collective (esp. as far as the notion of 'humanity' is concerned) and that we now live and act, for better or for worse, in an utterly de*anthropo*centred environment, while the narcissistic delusions of political leaders and organisations and their unquestioned anthropocentrism are proliferating all over the world.

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[167] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1967]), p. 9ff. and 84-5. For an extensive discussion see Arthur Bradley, *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2011).

[168] On the connection between deconstruction, politics and staging or theatricality see Samuel Weber's work, and specifically in relation to *Hamlet*: Samuel Weber, "Piece-Work", in: R.L. Rutsky and Bradley J. Macdonald, eds., *Strategies for Theory: From Marx to Madonna* (New York: SUNY, 2003), pp. 3-21. On the notion of theatre and *contretemps* (also further below, note 28) see Jacques Derrida, "Marx, c'est quelqu'un", in: *Marx en jeu*, eds. Marc Guillaume and Jean-Pierre Vincent (Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1997), esp. pp. 19-25; as well as the interview with Derrida in the same volume, esp. p. 61.

Shakespeare, Hamlet and (Post)Humanism

> Hamlet: (...) What is a man
> If his chief good and market of his time
> Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
> Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
> Looking before and after, gave us not
> That capability and godlike reason
> To fust in us unused. (IV.4.33-39)

From the outset, the question of identity and in particular the identity of the human are at the centre of *Hamlet*. The play shows all the characteristics of a horror story: a gothic setting, an eerie ghost, a dreadful secret, murder and suicide, (political) intrigue, tragic misjudgements, a tortured self-doubting hero on the edge of madness and a general massacre in the end. With great regularity, the existential question of meaning and the question of the place of the human is posed ('man's' position within the cosmos, 'his' particularity, 'his' indeterminacy, etc.). It is thus no great surprise that *Hamlet*, both the character and the tragedy, play a central role in the discussion about the relationship between Shakespeare and humanism. Neil Rhodes's words are representative in this respect:

> *Hamlet* is not so much the beginning as the end of the beginning [of modern humanism] (…). One reason it enjoys what is perhaps an unparalleled status in Western literature is that it provides a distillation of the key ideas associated with both humanism and modernity. It offers a blueprint of modern conceptions of the self. But as it does so it brings one aspect of humanism into conflict with the other, which is why we can think of it as representing the end of the beginning. *Hamlet* is a humanist work that also offers a critique of humanism.[169]

Humanism, ever since the Renaissance and early modern period, is founded on some basic assumptions that are currently being challenged (again, and more forcefully) by posthumanist approaches: the cosmic centrality of the human as the pinnacle and end point of evolution (anthropocentrism), a species-specific, shared, inner core or essence that all humans have in common (e.g, mind, language, consciousness of being and finality, etc.) and which radically differentiates them from all other organic and nonorganic entities. Also under attack is the existence of concepts such as personality, individuality, identity, emotion, freedom, moral responsibility, dignity and perfectibility as intrinsic to every human being.

Shakespeare is regularly understood in this context as *the* example of essential human genius, most forcibly by Harold Bloom, in his *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human*. According to Bloom, the great characters of Shakespeare, and Hamlet in particular, are the expression of a fundamental humanity. The fascination with Hamlet as a character lies mainly in his hesitation and his proto-existentialist self-doubt. Particularly relevant, in relation to posthumanist questions, is therefore Hamlet's insistence on the question, 'What is man?', as a basically proto-Kantian approach to philosophical anthropology. A good summary of the philosophical issues this raises can be found in Eric P. Levy's Hamlet *and the Rethinking of Man*, which traces the confrontation between the Aristotelian-cum-Thomist and the classical humanist notions of the rational animal (*animal rationale*) with regard to the role played by human reason – which Levy (amongst many others) sees at work in the tragedy of *Hamlet*:

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[169] Neil Rhodes, "Hamlet and Humanism", in: Garrett A. Sullivan et al., eds., *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 124. For a good summary of *Hamlet* and modern subjectivity see Andrew Fitzmaurice, "The Corruption of Hamlet", in: David Armitage et al., eds., *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 139-156.

> At bottom, what happens in *Hamlet* concerns a redefining of what is man, through interrogation and reinterpretation of the faculty of reason through which man *is* man, and not some other animal.[170]

Hamlet could thus be said to occupy a key position within the humanist version of 'hominisation' and 'anthropocentring'. In a time when precisely this anthropocentrism is being questioned *Hamlet* once again takes on a new political (posthumanist) dimension and Hamlet's 'The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right! (I.5.188-189), rings even more desperate from a *species* point of view, once human exceptionalism is being seriously and systematically questioned.

Humanism's claim of historical and transcendental universality was already the main target for the antihumanist literary and cultural theory of the second half of the 20th Century (i.e. poststructuralism, postmodernism, new historicism and cultural materialism) as mentioned above.[171] As a result, theory provoked a historical reinterpretation and a politicisation of the genealogies of early modernism, Shakespeare and his relation to the present (cf. presentism), according to Kiernan Ryan:

> Shakespeare's plays anticipate the impending displacement and disappearance of their world, and they solicit the reciprocal recognition that our world, likewise, conceals the evolving past of a prospective present. Their aim is to project us forward in time to a point where we can look back on Shakespeare's age and our own as the prehistory of an epoch whose advent humanity still awaits.[172]

Just as Shakespeare can be located at the beginning of or on the threshold of Western humanism, the present (i.e. the beginning of the 21st century) can be understood to be the final stage of this humanist and anthropocentric worldview. It would be wrong of course, to understand humanism as a purely conscious and consistent mindset, since its establishment and triumph has not occurred without major philosophical disagreements, bloody religious wars, political revolutions and colonial oppression. A major expression of the contradiction that resides within humanism – namely the contradiction between the peaceful ideal of a universal humanity and the inhuman cruelty of human reality – is the ambivalent attitude towards the idea of 'human rights' as a possible continuation of Eurocentrism and Western imperialism under the conditions of globalisation. The tension within humanism seems to lie largely in the fact that the universal validity of a humanistic ideal is always presupposed, while it can be clearly shown, historically, to be merely based on culturally specific norms and values.

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[170] Eric P. Levy, Hamlet *and the Rethinking of Man* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), p. 18.

[171] See for example the first volume of *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (London: Routledge, 1985), and Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

[172] Kiernan Ryan, "Shakespeare and the Future", in: Deborah Cartmell and Michael Scott, eds., *Talking Shakespeare: Shakespeare into the Millennium* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), p. 199. On the notion of presentism see Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, eds., *Presentist Shakespears* (London: Routledge, 2007).

It is in opposition to this ambivalence within humanism that a number of posthumanist approaches have been developed and introduced within Shakespeare studies (and elsewhere of course). However, as is the case for humanism, it is better to speak of these approaches in the plural, i.e. posthumanisms. Furthermore, it makes more sense, from a temporal point of view, not merely to envisage posthumanism as being in linear progression from and as supersession of humanism, but rather as an ongoing critique of and within humanism. One can perhaps best describe the meaning of the prefix 'post' in analogy with Lyotard's idea of 'Rewriting Modernity', namely understood as a process of perlaboration or *Durcharbeitung*.[173] Accordingly, Lyotard's notion of modernity in 'ana-', or the rewriting of modernity understood as deconstructive perlaboration, projected onto a *critical* posthumanism, can be understood as the *deconstruction* of humanism, to borrow Neil Badmington's phrase.[174]

Undoubtedly, however, the emergence of the current posthumanist dynamics is a result of the historical material and technological conditions 'now', but just like Shakespeare's work, posthumanism can both be understood as situated historically (i.e. singular) as well as a cultural constant with ongoing relevance (i.e. as a form of evolutionary adaptation). Both Shakespeare's work, with *Hamlet* in particular, and posthumanism deal with the question of the place of the human; both ask if there really is such a thing as true (i.e. essential) human nature. Posthumanist approaches attempt to understand the human from the perspective of 'its' repressed others (e.g. nonhuman animals, machines, monsters, aliens, or the 'inhuman' in general) and recontextualise 'its' relations with them. In particular, Donna Haraway's work on cyborgisation of the human, and N. Katherine Hayles's work on human digitialisation and computerisation, as well as the ongoing critique of human or humanist forms of speciesim (mostly understood, in analogy to racism, as irrational prejudice against nonhumans, which serves to legitimate the oppression and exploitation of the latter by humans) as opened up by Derrida's late texts and developed further in Cary Wolfe's work, amongst that of many others, working in the emerging fields of animal studies, ecocriticism and critical science studies (following Bruno Latour and actor-network-theory), as well as, new feminist materialism and, more recently, object-oriented-ontology and speculative realism.[175]

In science, statements qualifying the humanist world view have been commonplace for a while, especially in the neuro- and cognitive sciences, which have been calling into question the humanist ideas of free will and traditional forms of morality, as well as in biotechnology and the life sciences, which are challenging the special status of humans from an evolutionary perspective. Various post-metaphysical approaches within philosophy and technics also contribute by questioning the idea of any instrumentalised relationship between humans and technology (cf. Bernard Stiegler's work on technics and Peter Sloterdijk's notion of

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[173] Lyotard, "Rewriting Modernity", *The Inhuman*, see note 12 above.

[174] Neil Badmington, "Theorizing Posthumanism", *Cultural Critique* 53 (2003): 10-27.

[175] See the work of Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Levy Bryant and Timothy Morton; see also Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012).

‘anthropotechnics’), between humans, systems and environments (cf. Bruce Clarke’s work on ‘neocybernetics’), and between humans, language and cognition (cf. for example the more recent work by Mark Hansen). All these undermine the anthropocentric values on which humanism is based.

However, one should not forget that the special significance of Shakespeare for the current debate between humanism and posthumanism also arises of course from his central position within the canon of English, if not world literature (while the term ‘world literature’, similar to the already mentioned human rights, is heavily contested because of its humanist, colonialist and (neo)imperialist background). Advocates of Shakespeare’s universal value and humanist centrality, like Bloom, argue that Shakespeare’s great characters like Hamlet, are the expression of essential human personality and modern identity. However, very much against Bloom, the predominant theoretical orientation of the last decades (at least since the 1960s), has been radically antihumanist, particularly in the Anglo-American context. Figures associated with poststructuralism and postmodernism (Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Kristeva, Lyotard, Derrida, Baudrillard – i.e. the main protagonists of so-called ‘French theory’), as well as the representatives of the New Historicism (Greenblatt, Montrose) and Cultural Materialism (Dollimore, Sinfield, Drakakis, Belsey, Hawkes) have attacked ‘liberal humanism’ in order to expose its pseudo-universalism as an ideology, as outlined above. As a result, Shakespeare has been repositioned, through a historical recontextualisation and politicisation, and the renewed relevance of his work has been founded on a basic analogy between early and late modernity, or, one could say, between early and late humanism.[176]

What distinguishes current posthumanist forms of reading Shakespeare from earlier antihumanist readings by poststructuralists and New Historicists, however, is that current posthumanist approaches are taking the merely implied critique of anthropocentrism in the earlier antihumanist stances seriously, even literally, and as a result, they actively promote a postanthropocentric worldview. This means that the new key questions for Shakespeare studies are: how can one interpret a world in which the human subject is no longer the main focus, and in which it is being increasingly ‘de-centred’ by technology, the ‘environment’ and global challenges like climate change? In what way can Shakespeare possibly remain relevant under these conditions? To what extent might he even become more relevant, or in other words, how might he be repositioned as a mirror image between a proto- and a posthumanist age?

Hamlet as Posthumanist? Or, Deconstruction is a Posthumanism

> Hamlet: To be, or not to be, that is the question:
> Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them. (III.1.56-60)

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[176] See Jonathan Dollimore’s “Introduction to the Third Edition”, in: *Radical Tragedy* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004), pp. xiv-xl.

Hamlet plays an important part in critically evaluating the ongoing process of ‘posthumanisation’ since early modernity. The spectrum of reactions to this posthumanising process range from apocalyptic fears of utter dehumanisation to spiritual fantasies involving scenarios of transhuman (disembodied) bliss. In this context, Shakespeare and *Hamlet* become allies for CPH, which keeps its distance from both of these extremes and which instead looks for points of connection with and anticipations of a critique of contemporary humanism and anthropcentrism.

Such an approach, I would argue, can also be found in Derrida’s recourse to *Hamlet* as a strategic text that displays the deconstruction of metaphysical notions of truth, existence and presence at work, in *Specters of Marx*. In a parallel reading of *Hamlet* and Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*, Derrida shows how the ontological difference of the ghost (i.e. the ghost of Hamlet and that of communism) challenges an ontology based on the ideal of presence and instead exposes that notion of ontology as based on what he calls a ‘hauntology’ (from French ‘*hanter*’ to haunt). Hamlet stands here allegorically for the human doubting his own possibility to experience himself ontologically (‘to be or not to be (...)’) and which results in the impossibility of justifying any humanist (esp. Cartesian) reflexes from such an experience, especially the humanist faith placed in rational explanation (“Marcellus: Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio”. [I.1.42]) and in the possibility of revealing any transcendental forms of truth.[177]

What interests Derrida in *Hamlet* is Hamlet’s peculiar metaphysical condition provoked by having been interpellated by the ghost of Hamlet senior – which leads Derrida to take Hamlet as emblematic for the ‘hauntedness’ of ontology (hauntology) whose notions of truth and essence based on the idea of presence are *necessarily* haunted by apparitions. Hamlet is thus a very important figure in deconstruction’s politically and ethically motivated critique of metaphysics. The fact that Derrida also inscribed his reading of Hamlet and ‘his’ ghost within the history of marxism was never going to please those who had been calling for a straightforward positioning of deconstruction *vis-à-vis* a (marxist) politics for a while. In a sense, Derrida’s move in relation to marxism mirrors the exchange between him and Lacan and the relationship between deconstruction and psychoanalysis. In both cases – marxism (and arguably politics in general) and psychoanalysis (and arguably reading or analysis, maybe even thinking, in general) – deconstruction is parasitically inhabiting their respective discourses. What I would argue is that the same process has been at work in the relationship between deconstruction and posthumanism as well. With regard to all three discourses, this is also a question of their archives and their technological ‘supports’.

Hamlet’s ‘the time is out of joint’ has been seen as ‘modern man’s’ archetypical ‘human condition’ in ‘his’ own belatedness to history and metaphysics. And consequently, Derrida begins by asking: “How can one be late to the end of history?” (*SoM*, p. 15). This question returns ‘today’, with even more urgency, namely as the question of ‘how can one be late to the end of humanity’? If “haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony” (*SoM*, p. 37), the political question arising out of the 'end' of humanity is: what in this "triumphant phase of mourning work" (*SoM*, p. 52) that posthumanism might be a sign of, is being mourned – and what (humanism) is being 'inherited' by such a posthumanism? And, what is the trauma that is being 'displaced' in the process? In political terms, *Hamlet* is Derrida's illustration of the impossible necessity of a synchronised presence as a basis for political action. Hamlet hesitates to act because the time is out of joint and he has been given the impossible but inevitable task to set it right. Impossible, because the idea of a "contemporaneity of the present with itself" has either always already passed or is endlessly deferred, in short, the presence in which to 'act' merely ex-sists in *differance*. Necessary, because of the injunction Hamlet has received from Hamlet's ghost, demanding justice, and of the absence of choice as far as inheritance is concerned. Iterability *and* singularity of the event (of the political) thus create this impossible necessity or the 'immediacy' of action – a foundational opposition which calls for deconstruction. The important thing to note in this context is that while this reading of *Hamlet* is radically opposed to a certain idea of humanism, it does not in any way diminish the importance of human agency and decision.

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[177] Other texts where Derrida elaborates on his use of Hamlet are the already cited *Marx en jeu* (see note 17), as well as “Marx &Sons”, in: Michael Sprinker, ed., *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s* Specters of Marx (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 213.269, and “The Time Is Out of Joint”, in: Anselm Haverkamp, ed., *Deconstruction is/in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 14-38.

I would argue that it is at the moment when the political agency of the human is shown to be 'spectral' that Derrida's politics of spectrality, the political dimension of hauntology, comes into its own so to speak. To illustrate this, Derrida inscribes his reading of Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' provoked by Hamlet's haunted desire for justice within the history of technics. In a section called "Virtual Reality in Politics", Derrida explains the significance of the spectre in terms of the (contemporary) techno-spectralisation of the "event" (which elsewhere he also refers to as a combination of "actuvirtuality" and "artefactuality"):[178]

> If I have been insisting so much since the beginning on the logic of the ghost, it is because it points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity or actuality* (either present, empirical, living – or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non-presence). This logic of effectivity or actuality seems to be of a limited pertinence (…). [The limit] seems to be demonstrated today better than ever by the fantastic, ghostly, 'synthetic', 'prosthetic', virtual happenings in the scientific domain and thus the domain of the techno-media and thus the public or political domain. It is also made more manifest by what inscribes the speed of a virtuality irreducible to the opposition of the act and the potential in the space of the event, in the event-ness of the event. (*SoM*, p. 63)

The disappearance of human agency from global politics is a result of the techno-economic acceleration driven by techno-science and the virtualisation processes of techno-media, which threaten the very illusion of a possibility of political action based on a conscious (human) decision. In this context, Derrida's spectral politics uses Hamlet, the ditherer, the 'prince of deconstruction', to illustrate that the non-contemporaneity of itself of ontological presence is not, in fact, the problem but instead constitutes the very condition for change and action – hence his emphasis on the idea of Hamlet's *contretemps*.[179] Derrida's key notions here are

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[178] Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality: An interview with Jacques Derrida", *Radical Philosophy* 68 (1994): 28-41.

[179] Derrida's reference to the *contretemps* in relation to Hamlet's 'out of joint time' is explained in *Marx en jeu*. He refers to the "*anachronie"* and "*dyschronie"* of the ghost (in Marx and *Hamlet*) in relation to the theatrical stage, representation and the transformation of public space (or the 'public sphere') by

'actuality', 'inheritance' and 'mourning'. He refers to *Specters of Marx* as a treatise on the question of a "political mourning"[180] and as an analysis of the "current (geopolitical, geo-economic, tele-techno-media, etc.) phase". A politics that resists the process of ongoing dehumanisation will inevitably need to address this decisional *contretemps* within the contemporary calls for a global political stage (the question of 'obscenity' and 'theatricality' referred to above), inheritance (the question of the archive at the time of its digitalisation and virtualisation) and mourning (i.e. justice in the age of globalisation).

Posthumanist Readings of Hamlet *– The Spectre of Human Politics*

> Hamlet: What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god – the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me, no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so. (II.2.312-319)

To read in such a strategically 'misanthropic' way[181] as Hamlet seems to suggest here also means: "to read in a posthuman way (…) to read against one's self, against one's own deep-seated self-understanding as a member or even a representative of a certain 'species'".[182] However, to think 'beyond' or 'outside' anthropocentric and humanist assumptions does not necessarily have to be understood in this context as a form of "keeping apace with technology". There is also a much 'slower' posthumanism, a posthumanism 'without' technology, which reinterprets the meaning and the importance of the human within 'its' environment from the point of view of humanism's diverse displaced nonhuman others. This is, in fact, a move that has proven particularly fruitful for Shakespeare and early modern studies.[183]

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the media, as "teletechnological virtualisation which invades our world, in a determining fashion for politics, through television and other electronic information media" (p. 26; my translation). Neoliberal economic practices use this "change in gear [*changement de vitesse*]" that new virtualising media-technologies allow, for "speculation" and for creating practices of competition and exploitation on a global scale. Political action and resistance to the dehumanising potential of these developments may indeed be helped by a strategic and alternative use of the *achronie* of the *contretemps*: "The art of the counter-time is also a political art, an art of the theatre, the art of giving the word *à contretemps* to those who, *par les temps qui courent*, do not have the right to speak" (*Marx en jeu*, p. 28).

[180] Derrida, *Marx en jeu*, p. 55.

[181] On the notion of 'misanthropy' in connection with the 'unhuman' see Daniel Cottom, *Unhuman Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), esp. pp. 148-160.

[182] See Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, "What Is a Posthumanist Reading?" *Angelaki* 13.1 (2008): 95-110.

[183] For an overview of how animal studies have been re-examining the borderline between human and animal, redrawn at the beginning of or in early modernity, and questioned from a late modern postanthropocentric and posthumanist perspective, see for example Erica Fudge's and Bruce Boehrer's work. From a critical science point of view, current processes of rewriting the history of technology are also interested in the analogies between early and late modernity, and in the analogies between pre-modern cultural technologies and postmodern technoculture. In this context, Jonathan Sawday's, Adam Max Cohen's, Jessica Wolfe's and Henry S. Turner's work needs to be mentioned. Sawday uses provocative expressions like 'renaissance cyborg' and 'renaissance computer' to show how early modern notions of physicality, machines and automata already problematise the Cartesian-humanist

In the context of such a posthumanist reading of *Hamlet*, following on from Derrida, the connection between politics and life is bound to become a main focus. In his final interview Derrida plays with the notion of "*apprendre à vivre, enfin*"[184] – the impossible necessity of 'learning how to live'. This line of thought, namely that it is ultimately impossible (for any human) to learn how to live, is in fact first articulated in *Specters of Marx*, where in the "Exordium" Derrida calls forth the spectre of "someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally*. Finally but why? *To learn to live*: a strange watchword. Who would learn? From whom? To teach to live, but to whom? Will we ever know? Will we ever know to live and first of all what 'learn to live' means? And why 'finally'?" (*SoM*, p. xvii).[185] In the context of *posthumanist* politics these questions receive an additional ring of urgency, as soon as they are understood to be addressing the 'human' at the time of 'its' disappearance, and to be asking what this impossible experience of such a 'finality' might mean. Life 'as such' cannot 'teach' about its finality and its ultimate meaning, only death can. But death cannot be experienced except in the form of an absolute alterity – the death of the other. Which means that the meaning of life has to remain 'spectral', or that only spectres can teach, so to speak, as Derrida explains: "If it – learning to live – remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death alone. What happens between two, and between all the 'two's' one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some

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worldview from its inception. Hamlet's letter to Ophelia (II.2.123-124), signed "Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him, Hamlet", for example, already represents some 'pre-Cartesian' proof of the human idea of self-instrumentalisation as a machine and thus already locates the beginning of an ontological crisis of human autonomy within the era of the first machines. The problematisation of human autonomy has also been at the centre of emerging ecocritical approaches in literary and cultural theory. These approaches question the traditional humanist anthropocentrism and, instead, focus more on the natural and systemic-technological networking of humans and environments and on the importance of non-human actors (cf. Latour's actor-network-theory). Gabriel Egan, for example, shows that "our understanding of Shakespeare and our understanding of Green politics have overlapping concerns and can be mutually sustaining" (Egan, *Green Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 1). What is at stake here is an ecological interpretation of Shakespeare, as well as a critical evaluation of Shakespeare's pre- or early-modern ecology and its relevance, especially with regard to the relationship between nature and culture, and between nature and technology. Similarly, the so-called 'cognitive turn' and the resulting new insights into human (and nonhuman) thinking has a bearing on approaches within Shakespeare studies. On the one hand, the digitalisation of Shakespeare's text corpus demands an engagement with the role of cultural change in the information age (the institutionalisation of 'digital humanities' or 'humanities computing' is a signs of this), and on the other hand, with the question of Shakespeare's pre- or early modern understanding of information. Additionally, breakthroughs in the current scientific understanding of cognitive processes call, of course, for new approaches to reading literature in general (cf. cognitive poetics, cognitive criticism). Furthermore, the emergence of new networked media and their convergence with and remediation of mass media through information technology and new code-based digital and interactive media, represent a huge potential for the future of Shakespeare studies, in particular in terms of corpus access and new forms of knowledge production. What may be specifically posthumanist about this is the departure from traditional textual philology to a more dynamic and pluralistic aesthetics of variants, interactivity and generativity – which could of course be understood as an immense (philological and pedagogical) opportunity.

[184] Derrida, *Apprendre à vivre enfin – Entretien avec Jean Birnbaum* (Paris: Galilée, 2005). Derrida also elaborates on his and Hélène Cixous' respective notions of life in *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say…* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). For a commentary see my "Theory… for Life", in: Ivan Callus et al., eds, *Style in Theory: Between Literature and Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 303-322.

[185] See also Peter Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost (…). So it would be necessary to learn spirits" (*SoM*, p. xviii). To be *with* spectres is therefore Derrida's definition of politics ("a *politics* of memory" (p. xix)), or "no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born" (p. xix).

Hamlet's hovering between life and death, or his 'survival', today, takes on a new global significance when a post-nuclear,[186] post-apocalyptic 'humanity' is increasingly caught in representations of its own survival, trying to 'learn to live, finally', all the while being under the impression of having outlived itself. It is not much of a surprise that, under these circumstances, the re-conceptualisations of life pro-*life*-rate, one could say. From biopolitcs, 'bare life', to necropolitics[187] – life has become the ultimate techno-scientific capitalist object and commodity.[188] While the resulting 'virtualisation' of life accelerates, the Derridean politics of the *contretemps* ("Is not disjuncture the very possibility of the other?", *SoM*, p. 22) seeks to decelerate and unhinge. Deconstruction, one could therefore say *is* a posthumanism, in the sense that it destabilises the link between human (singularity) and humanity (species). In this context, *Specters of Marx* itself arrived about twenty years before its time. At its time of 'apparition', namely in the context of Francis Fukuyama's re-announcement of Kojève's (Hegelian) 'posthistorical man' – and with Derrida, at that time, reminding his readers of deconstruction's first encounter with the problematics of the 'ends of man'[189] – *Specters of Marx,* already in 1994 (and even, retrospectively, in 1972), spelled out the 'logic of the end of history' as the logic of the 'end of humanity'. Derrida thus seems to anticipate the entire dynamic of the posthuman and posthumanist politics, when he says:

> There where man, a certain determined concept of man, is finished, there the pure humanity of man, of the other man and of man as other begins or has finally the chance of heralding itself – of promising itself. In an apparently inhuman or else a-human fashion. (*SoM*, p. 74)

Derrida is eager to critically inscribe this comment at once into Fukuyama's triumphant neoliberal appropriation of Kojève – "[e]ven if these propositions still call for critical or deconstructive questions, they are not reducible to the vulgate of the capitalist paradise as the end of history" (*SoM*, p. 74) – while reminding Fukuyama, neomarxists and new historicists alike that another politics, history, future etc. is possible only as a radical opening and disjuncture:

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[186] Which does not mean in any way the end of traditional threats of nuclear warfare, terrorism or catastrophes, of course. See Derrida's "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)", *Diacritics* 14.2 (1984): 20-31.

[187] See Giorgio Agamben's return to Michel Foucault's notion of biopower and biopolitcs in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), and Roberto Esposito's *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). On necropolitics see Achille Mbembe's influential "Necropolitics", *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11-40. For a good summary of the debate on the biopolitical see Timothy Campbell, *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) and my review appended to *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*.

[188] See Kaushik Sunder Rajan, *Biocapital: The Constitution of Post-Genomic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Nicholas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

[189] See note 15 above.

> Permit me to recall very briefly that a certain deconstructive procedure (…) consisted from the outset in putting into question the onto-theo- but also archeo-teleological concept of history – in Hegel, Marx, or even in the epochal thinking of Heidegger. Not in order to show that this onto-theo-archeo-teleology locks up, neutralizes, and finally cancels historicity. It was then a matter of thinking another historicity – not a new history or still less a 'new historicism', but another opening of event-ness as historicity that permitted one not to renounce, but on the contrary to open up access to an affirmative thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise as promise: as *promise* and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design. Not only must one not renounce the emancipatory desire, it is necessary to insist on it more than ever, it seems, and insist on it, moreover, as the very indestructibility of the 'it is necessary'. This is the condition of a re-politicization, perhaps of another concept of the political. (*SoM*, pp. 74-75)

Hamlet, thus, seems to encapsulate the inbetween-ness of these two possibilities: how to read and what to do 'after' the end, in the *contretemps* which is the 'end of humanity', understood as chance for another, deconstructive, radically posthuman*ist* (but not necessarily) posthuman politics. So, just when Derrida might be hijacked by some versions of posthumanist (or even transhumanist) politics, eager to re-ontologise or re-teleologise the 'project of humanity' under the new name of the 'posthuman', he, anticipatingly, in *Specters of Marx*, cautions against such a move and demands an 'other politics', one that could be called *radically* posthumanist (i.e. addressing the inequalities *within* humanity, between humans) *as well as* postanthropocentric (i.e. rethinking the relationship between humans and nonhumans), *at the same time*:

> For it must be cried out, at the time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity (…). [L]et us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth. (And provisionally, but with regret, we must leave aside here the nevertheless indissociable question of what is becoming of so-called 'animal' life, the life and existence of 'animals' in this history. This question has always been a serious one, but it will become massively unavoidable.) (*SoM*, p. 85)

This question of an *other* politics between humans and nonhumans – to which Derrida himself devoted much more explicit attention in his late work on (human) sovereignty and (animal) life[190] – constitutes the most important and urgent task for a posthumanist politics, namely:

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[190] See in particular, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), and *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009 and 2011).

what future is there for humans and their nonhuman others in a global geopolitical and geo-ecological system, that some refer to as the ‘Anthropocene’, and which increasingly sees itself *after* life?

In this context, Hamlet’s answer to Claudius as to where (the murdered) Polonius might be, today might be seen as an untimely echo of a postanthropocentric-posthumanist political-ecological statement on ‘how to live, finally’:

> Not where he eats, but where ‘a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots (…). A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm. (IV.3.19-28)

4 Treasuring the Self – A Posthumanist Reading of John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"

> [A]t once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason. [1817][191]

Secret Treasures

> It has been rightly said: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"; our treasure is where the beehives of our knowledge are.[192]

The word 'treasure' somehow seems to provoke the most 'romantic' associations of deserts, islands and ancient monuments, hiding at once terrible and dangerous secrets and promising the most gratifying booty. They are perfect screens of our desires and anxieties, and thus represent the very essence of who we are, i.e. the treasure and me, or the treasure of my 'self', 'my self' as treasure. The notion of the treasure is evidently shot through with metaphysics and is therefore closely connected to the question of identity, literature, meaning, truth and presence – all those questions that have been dealt with by this very specific late-twentieth and early-twenty-first academic discourse called 'theory' and, before that, by the Romantics. It therefore seems promising to look at 'treasure' not so much as a motif but as a symptom or maybe a crypt of a very specific metaphysical 'necessity'. In fact, it is more the verb, the dynamic process of 'treasuring' that might be of help here, and which this chapter wants to investigate through what might be taken as an exemplary Romantic poem – Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale". It will do so in relation to 'theory', which is really shorthand for 'poststructuralism', 'deconstruction', and, more recently, 'critical posthumanism', as well as the question of what their futures might hold in store.

The *Oxford English Dictionary*, this treasury and thesaurus of words, promising the instantaneous and complete fullness of meaning, defines treasure as "wealth or riches stored or accumulated; esp., in the form of precious metals (...). A store or stock of anything valuable (...). Anything valued and preserved as precious". While the verb, 'treasure', refers to "put away or lay aside (anything of value) for preservation, security, or future use; to hoard or store up (...); to furnish or endow with treasures (...); to enrich (...); to cherish, prize". It seems as if the full ambiguity of Derridean '*différance*' (with its ever-deferred 'fullness' or 'presence' and its ever-differing meaning from it(s)self as the impossible foundation of 'Western metaphysics') is fully at work in the very concept of treasure and treasuring.[193] In the securing or storing aspect of treasure, which we might call its 'archival' dimension, the identity of the treasure seems secured or at least determinable as value, its preciousness based on rarity, difference and economy. The very storing of the treasure, however, is future-oriented, based on deferred enjoyment, as a source of desire that is based on hiding. This we might call the 'secretive' aspect of the treasure, whose essence or truth must remain hidden and postponed. In an almost classical Derridean sense, the treasure, therefore, 'haunts'. Its metaphysical drift, like that of any metaphysics, is towards a 'hauntology', namely a presence promised to itself that nevertheless must remain a ghostly and insistent, deferred, 'other'. Treasure's 'essence', one might say, lies in this 'yearning', which is the fundamental drive of its underlying metaphysical humanism – as manifest in literature, and especially Romantic poetry – a desire to become transparent to one's self, or to Nietzsche's fusion of becoming and being, pure acting, life and art etc.

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[191] John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, 2 vols, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. I, p. 193.

[192] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, §1, cited in: Daniel W. Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 60.

[193] Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Différance", in: *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 1-28.

Keats – Autobiography of a National Treasure

> Literature keeps a secret that doesn't exist, in a sense.[194]

Why Keats? Why the "Ode to a Nightingale"? In a sense, both are national treasures, of course, maybe even treasures of world literature. Keats's life has fired up people's imagination, while the "Ode to a Nightingale" keeps on puzzling its readers as to what extent it might possibly be an autobiographical crypt. In fact, this combination constitutes an almost perfect example of the idea of the 'secret of literature' and the 'secret in literature'. According to Derrida, literature harbours an absolute secret of alterity, namely the structural unknowability of the other as other, which is the necessary space for any fictionality to become possible. In other words, radical undecidability between fiction and fact and the idea that literature, at least 'in theory', must be allowed to say 'anything', is what constitutes the impossible 'identity' of fiction and possibly the very principle of identity in general. In addition, the 'essence' of any secret (literature, identity, etc.) is something that cannot be shared *as* a secret, even though it is the 'essence' or 'truth' of every bond. Nowhere is this more insistent than in autobiography, which, for Derrida, is the very "locus of the secret",[195] and thus the unresolvable, unrecoverable continuity and identity of poet and poem, or their mutual inscriptions as a "writing self".[196] Both, the poet's and the poem's identity, are suffering so to speak from a troubled 'self', which is precisely not some identity trouble but rather a problematisation of identity as such, maybe even the deconstruction of identity.

Herein lies the attempt to link treasure, secret and self with a 'symptomatic' reading of Keats's "Nightingale" as a textual crypt that challenges the identity of meaning and the meaning of identity. Keats is thus not just any example, he is exemplary of a question that is as old as humanity, if there is such a thing, a question which touches on the very foundation of humanism and anthropocentrism: who (or what) am (or is) 'I'? 'I is an other', another poet, Rimbaud, will write, on his 'drunken boat', in 1871. 'What is man?' is the question that haunts the entire tradition of philosophical anthropology. Günter Anders, representative of a whole generation of post-WWII intellectuals, speaks of man's "obsolescence" (1956).[197] 'What *was* man?' Michel Foucault asks in *Les Mots et les choses* (1966),[198] and today, when the human is threatened with yielding his or her last remaining secrets, when the door to the safe is almost unlocked, 'posthumanists' or even 'transhumanists' – a strange mixture of cognitive, bio- and neuro-scientists and media and cultural theorists – speak either of the evolutionary supersession of the human species by cyborgs and machines, computers, neuronal networks and artificial intelligence, or, in stark contrast to this posthuman euphoria, of a new holistic, neohumanist, or new-age inspired return *of* nature (as opposed to the Romantic return *to* nature).

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[194] Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 162.

[195] (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001: 57-59),

[196] Cf. also "Others are Secret Because They Are Other", in: Derrida, *Paper Machine*, pp. 136-163; and "This Strange Institution Called Literature", in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-75.

In many ways, Keats is the incorporation of the Romantic poet. A statement like the one made by Furniss and Bath is quite symptomatic in this respect: "Keats seems to embody our collective idea of the quintessential poet, and his 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819) is often thought of as an exemplary poem".[199] As the youngest of the 'second Romantic generation' (together with Byron and Shelley) Keats and his work is characterised by a short but intensive creative period. His short life full of suffering, illness and loss fulfils all the expectations raised by the image of a tormented, emotional and heroic 'genius' of a poet. When Keats died of 'consumption', in 1821, at the age of 25, like his mother and younger brother Tom (just a year) before, he had been a 'practising' poet for only about seven years (of which merely five were dedicated to poetry 'full time'). Not having had the privilege of receiving a classical humanistic education like most of his Romantic peers he had first learned the trade of a surgeon and apothecary and pursued medical studies until, encouraged by one of his mentors and editors, Leigh Hunt, he decided to abandon medicine and become a 'professional poet'. The works that make him one of the most important and essential English poet, are collected in one single volume, published in 1820 (*Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and Other Poems*). Among the "Other Poems" the title refers to are Keats's great odes: "To Psyche", "Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Ode on Melancholy", "Ode on Indolence" and "To Autumn". His short intensive creative phase, full of promise and potentiality, contributes to a certain stylisation, mythologisation and heroisation of Keats's person and of the figure of the Romantic poet as such. It also usually leads to an emphasis on something like Romantic unity or 'essence', which literary critics have always been looking for (and have usually found of course) in Keats. He thus tells us as much about historical Romanticism as about changing aesthetic criteria, as well as cultural political and moral values in criticism. Cultural poetics and cultural politics are inextricably linked in Keats's work, his biography and his reception. As a case study in 'literary treasury', hardly any other poet than Keats (with the possible exception of his great model, Shakespeare) might serve better to ask the question of the identity of the poet, of poetry and the poetic experience.

Keats's entire oeuvre in fact could be seen as a self-stylised, spiritual autobiography. His letters are impregnated with his poetic creativity and represent the search of a young agnostic for undogmatic knowledge, freedom and sensual experience. Just like Goethe's Werther (and his modern followers, from Baudelaire and the *poètes maudits* to Jack Kerouac, the beatniks and all kinds of modern and postmodern 'subcultures') Keats belongs to the category of the rebelling youth, who is constantly looking for a true and authentic self – an ontological treasure-hunt after the innermost secret truth. In contrast with his somewhat more egotistic Romantic peers, however, Keats seems more reserved, secretive and mysterious, but also more sensitive and empathic, more positive, even 'ethical' – the kind of emotional 'softie', maybe even the equivalent of contemporary 'goths' and 'emus', and, for that reason, he maybe also less obsolete than many of his fellow Romantics. It could even be argued that it is the Keatsian searching 'I' that we associate with youth and with whom, as adults, we tend to fall out and by which, as grown-ups, we might even feel challenged, embarrassed or disturbed.

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[197] Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen 1: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (München: C.H Beck, 1956); Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen 2: Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution* (München: C.H Beck, 1980).

[198] Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

[199] Tom Furniss and Michael Bath, *Reading Poetry: An Introduction* (London: Prentice Hall, 1996), p. 4.

Literary criticism of Keats usually comes in two forms: one that takes Keats's thoughts expressed in his letters and poems as cues for an explanation of an aestheticised 'philosophy of life', which is seen as evolving from juvenile aesthetic ('objective') idealism to more or less disillusioned scepticism, nostalgia, maybe even nihilism. The other form of criticism normally emphasises the sensuality in Keats's poetry and stresses not so much development but the inevitable, maybe even intended, contradiction within Keats's 'genius'. This genius is therefore often represented as ambiguous in order to illustrate the tension between 'sensations' and 'thoughts' that underlies Keats's work.

Central to these evaluations are of course Keats's notions of 'negative capability' and that of the 'chameleon poet'. Both can be somewhat clarified in a close reading of the "Ode to a Nightingale". One could argue that this ode continues the outlined logic of 'exemplarity' in the form of a condensation. Romanticism (at least a certain understanding of it) is 'personified' in Keats and in a further substitution, the example of the example so to speak, the 'Nightingale' is taken as some kind of 'essential' Keats (other forms of essentialism are of course always thinkable, however, and that is one of the main points, any of these processes are an essential part of 'treasuring', in the sense of a double move of revealing the essence as value and hiding its secret, its crypt or 'truth'). First of all, the ode as a genre has of course a long and venerable history, from its Pindaric origins, to Horatian classicism, and to European and English Romanticism, during which it was practised by virtually all major poets (for example, Wordsworth's "To Immortality", Coleridge's "Dejection", Shelley's "West Wind", or Byron's "Ode to Napolen" and "Ode to Venice", or, in France, by Lamartine and Hugo, in Germany, by Klopstock and Hölderlin). The ode is at once a solemn address and an aesthetic self-performance. Usually dedicated to the celebration of an object or a mythical figure, the ode contains a paradox between its personification (*prosopopoeia*) or animated apostrophe (*invocatio*) and its extreme self-reflexivity and visionary character. Keats, who is arguably the master of the ode in English, manages to tailor what might otherwise be a very constraining genre to his very own needs. And in this context the "Ode to a Nightingale" takes up another exemplary function, namely it is here that Keats uses for the first time a form that combines the strength of his sonnets (for example "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer", "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles", or "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be", right up to his last work, "Bright Star") with the intrinsically dialectic form of the ode. He returns to the regular Horatian ode stanza (instead of the irregular form preferred by Wordsworth and Coleridge) and invents a ten-line stanza with a Shakespearean quatrain and a rhyme scheme of *abab*, followed by a Petrarchan sestett of *cdecde*, containing a metric variation of a trimeter in line eight to complement the iambic pentameter throughout. This will be the form that Keats uses in all his 'great odes'. The ode with its rhetorical, metrical and rhythmic complexities in fact develops into the ideal form to express essentially Romantic, psychological ideas surrounding the identity of the poetic, or 'writing self' and the function of aesthetic, or poetic communication. Keats manages to combine the perfection of the genre with sincerity in the expression of emotion and dialectical oppositions of metaphysical themes (for example, the opposition between art and reality, happiness and sadness, truth and appearance, etc.) which can then be taken as the basis for a general statement about the *conditio humana*.[200] This is precisely what constitutes Keats's already mentioned but not entirely unproblematic 'topicality' and relevance today.

The Secret of Identity – "Ode to a Nightingale"

> Now (…) we all do nominalism *sans le savoir*, as if it were a general premise of our thought, an acquired axiom.[201]

The topic of the "Ode to a Nightingale" is of course an established theme, a topos, derived from the ancient myth of Philomela (there are a number of Romantic nightingale poems, for example Coleridge's "To the Nightingale" (1796) and "The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem" (1798)). The poem starts somewhat unexpectedly not with an apostrophe or *invocatio* but with the introspection of the poetic self. It characterises the process of poetic creation with all its metaphysical and emotional contradiction. "My heart", "my sense" – the contradiction suffered by the poet is at once heightened and dampened as if under the influence of drugs. Introspection, in fact, starts with the extraordinary sensitisation of the I, or the writing self. Only at the beginning of the first sestett does the direct address to the nightingale occur in reply to its song. However, it is from the start a selfless listening and feeling, not guided by 'envy' of the bird's serenity and happiness. Almost immediately therefore there is a relation to Keats's ideal of the poet's 'negative capability', which says that poetic genius cannot be located in identity but, on the contrary, depends on the poet's temporarily being able to suspend or transcend his self, which allows him to overcome superficial oppositions. Lacking epistemological insight he instead focuses on the essence of sensual experience, namely the privileging of freed 'imagination' as the way to the hidden treasure, i.e. truth that lies in beauty.[202]

The idea of ecstatic epiphany is continued in the second stanza in which the poet craves for wine and dance as another form of self-disappearance: "leave the world unseen, / And with thee fade away into the forest dim" – a self-dissolution taken up again at the beginning of stanza three: "Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget". The imaginary dialogue with the nonhuman animal other remains however anthropocentrically motivated, for the poet longs for an escape from the *conditio humana*, the "vale of soul-making", which is a woeful but nevertheless necessary precondition for self-transcendence. What the nightingale has never known, namely the human knowledge of mortality and finality, the suffering, aging and mourning that constitutes the human species – personified in Keats's younger brother, whom Keats had nursed until his death at the age of nineteen, the year before (cf. "Where youth grow pale, and spectre-thin, and dies"). Thinking, in typically Romanic, anti-Enlightenment fashion, is equated with the experience of 'despair' and 'sorrow' – a state of the mind which is not capable of knowing either 'beauty' or 'love'.

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[200] On Keats's "humanistic naturalism" see M. H. Abrams *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 67.

[201] Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p. 135.

[202] Cf. Keats's letter to his brother George 22 December 1817 in: Keats, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, vol. I, p. 184.

The mood of the poet is elevated in his exclamation: "Away! Away! For I will flee to thee", whose assonance resembles that of the nightingale's call. He realises that neither the drugs nor medicine of the first, nor the wine of the second stanza can lead to a union with the free creature, but only the 'blindness' of poetry itself ("the viewless wings of Poesy"). The "dull brain" is evoked almost 'clinically', 'neurologically', but its role is deception because it "perplexes and retards". As if in trance the poet experiences the synesthetic apotheosis of the plentiful vegetation, the starlit summer night replete with scent and humming. However, in the midst of this sensual intensity, in stanza six, the I becomes aware of the reality of death: "Darkling I listen; and, for many a time I have been half in love with easeful Death". Half in love with easeful death, whom Keats's poetry so often invokes, the I comes to. The song of the nightingale recalls the poet to consciousness and a barrier falls between the poet's self-identity and his nonhuman animal other: "While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such ecstasy". This is where the intensifying and reversing role of the eighth line becomes fully apparent. "In such ecstacy" refers both to the poet's innermost emotional state and to his surroundings, so that the I becomes aware of the impossibility of a fusion or an appropriation, i.e. a self-realisation through identification with the other: "Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain – To thy high requiem become a sod". The nightingale has already started on its requiem for the human while it itself belongs to immortality: "Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!"[203]

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[203] Jorge Luis Borges famously used this line to explain the distinction between 'Aristotelian nominalists' and 'Platonic realists'. For the former, Keats's notion of the nightingale's archetypal immortality remains a 'secret', whereas the latter see reality located in the 'idea' or 'class' rather than in any individual manifestation of the bird. Borges elaborates on this in "A History of Eternity" (in: Borges, *The Total Library*, p. 135) in the form of a "general history of eternity": "Or rather, of eternities, for human desire dreamed two successive and mutually hostile dreams by that name: one, realist, yearns with a strange love for the still and silent archetypes of all creatures; the other, nominalist, denies the truth of the archetypes and seeks to gather up all the details of the universe in a single second. The first is based on realism, a doctrine so distant from our essential nature that I disbelieve all interpretations of it, including my own; the second, on realism's opponent, nominalism, which affirms the truth of individuals and the conventional nature of genres". Borges, of course feels uncomfortable with the absence of eternity in nominalism, as he explains: "Without an eternity, without a sensitive mirror of what passes through every soul, universal history is lost time, and along with it our personal history – which rather uncomfortably makes ghosts of us" (p. 136). This passage clearly anticipates Derrida's notion of 'hauntology' and goes to the heart of the ambiguity of the self that Keats seems to be struggling with in the "Ode" and which is enacted, so to speak, in its (self-)deconstruction. Borges's subsequent proposal of his own "personal theory of eternity" (p. 137), entitled "Feeling in Death", almost sounds like Derrida's idea of a "messianism without messiah" (in: Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), *passim*): "Mine is an impoverished eternity, without God or even a co-proprietor, and entirely devoid of archetypes". However, Borges seems unaware that this proposition itself constitutes a kind of deconstruction of his opposition between realism and nominalism.

However, the poet's self-realisation appears ambiguous – there is both sadness and joy at having re-found the mortal self, and at possibly having elevated it. It is only in stanza seven that the poet becomes aware of the humanist, mythological importance of the scene: "The voice I hear this passing night was heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown", signifying the process of human self-alienation and self-exile, or the existential (Heideggerian) 'thrownness' of the human in its yearning (cf. the image of the "alien corn" and "lands forlorn").

The repetition of "forlorn" finally turns the poet's attention to language itself. The first "forlorn", meaning 'vast' or 'desolate', leads to the questioning of the identity of linguistic meaning as such, because the second "forlorn" ('desperate' or 'miserable') clearly refers to the poet's inner state: "Forlorn! The very word sounds like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" It is not difficult to imagine how a deconstructive reading of the poem would begin precisely here, in claiming that it is the very alterity of language, the lack of identity and selfsameness in language as such, which prevents self-presence, a being-at-one-with-one's-self in the sense of 'fullness' or 'richness'. Instead, the treasure of selfsameness remains a promise, a secret and a crypt, deferred and always differing from itself, as proposed above, an example of Derridean *différance* – i.e. as an impossible but necessary precondition that only ever manifests itself as a trace. The treasured self is and will remain a fortress, a safe, locked. In fact, the value of the treasure lies in its secrecy, which is the effect of its 'treasuring'. "Forlorn" designates experience of self as such, its symbol is the tolling bell, the word, and meaning in general. Even though language and thus poetry cannot do justice to the yearning of the poet, it nevertheless remains his only hope of expressing and overcoming his "sole self", his utterly 'decentred' subject. Negative capability could thus be interpreted as the Romantic version of the linguistic process of self-deconstruction (an economy of an ongoing deconstruction of the self, or a deconstructing by itself) of the 'metaphysics of presence', which of course has been (and, arguably, remains) the ultimate target of theory, and Derridean deconstruction in particular.

The elf's (or the nightingale's) deceptive spell, however, is broken by now: "The fancy cannot cheat so well (…) deceiving elf". The desire for self-identity is once more deferred. It seems as if the poet in the last ten lines of the ode, while the nightingale's song disappears into the next valley, is completely re-evaluated. The poet's nostalgia turns into disappointment, almost resentment. "Adieu! Adieu! Thy plaintive anthem fades", for the second and last time the nightingale's song is fused with the poet's perception through onomatopoeia. This time, however, it means farewell, complaint and mourning ("plaintive anthem"), while the bird is nestling in the next vale of soul-making. Thus it is the nonhuman animal other whose memory trace allows the human I of the poet to experience himself as another, at least for a moment, through deferral and detour. But this is no ontological foundation on which to build, no treasure to hold in one's hand, nothing that could be made present, but a phantasm, a vision: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music (…) Do I wake or sleep?" What remains is the ambiguity as most foundational experience of human identity.

Romanticism... in Theory

> Keats has no theory (…).[204]

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[204] T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* [1933] (London: Faber & Faber, 1950), p. 102.

Job done, one could argue. Keats in particular and Romantic poetry in general may be identified as more or less (self-)conscious precursors to deconstruction and beyond. From a slightly more cynical point of view, however, it could be said that literary criticism and (literary) theory – this very peculiar kind of treasure hunt – in the end always finds what it has been looking for. The text or poem was always going to yield (its meaning, its innermost, its treasure, the returned investment). T.S. Eliot and Keats's modernist critics understood 'negative capability' as a kind of spiritual 'disinterestedness' (an almost Heideggerian '*Gelassenheit*', a self-abandoning, i.e. the precursor to the postmodern 'death of the subject'). Even though Eliot did not directly comment on Keats's odes or his poetry as such but focused on his letters, in Eliot's opposition to Shelley and other Romantic poets, it is Keats who arguably comes closest to his ideal of the poet's 'impersonality', for as opposed to Shelley and Wordsworth, Keats did not have a 'theory', according to Eliot, and was not even interested in developing one. "Keats has no theory", however, as befits a true poet, he has, like Shakespeare, "a philosophical mind".[205]

In this sense Keats's poetry must come close to Eliot's ideal of a 'unified sensibility' and the achievement of an 'objective correlative' in a poet and his poetry – ideals which, according to Murray Krieger, also form the basis of 'New Criticism'. Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" must exemplify, then, Eliot's notion of the poet's self-abandonment which is: "a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality".[206] However, this process of depersonalisation which is the core of Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry, and which thinks of the poet's self as a mere catalyst between tradition and the individual talent, between emotion and sensibility, is launched precisely through the contradiction that Eliot tries to overcome, namely the experience of ambiguity, the kind of ambiguity Keats's poetic I experiences in relation to the singing nightingale. According to Eliot, poetry should not be a detachment from emotion but the flight from emotion, not an expression of personality but an escape from personality. However, Eliot is quick to add that only those poets who have emotions and personality in the first place may know what it means to escape from them.[207]

From Eliot's idea of 'catalytic' or almost scientifically 'clinical' poetry to the idea of immanentism in literary criticism, i.e. the New Criticism, there is only one relatively small step. Neither the subjectivity of aesthetic experience nor the so-called 'intentional fallacy'[208] can reveal the treasure, the key to the safe lies in establishing the 'objectivity', that is to say, the 'identity' of the text, or poem, or, in this case, the nightingale's song (to) itself. This objectification of the text, in turn, allows for correspondences between New Criticism and Structuralism, even though new criticism never took Eliot's impersonality too personally and instead carried on emitting aesthetic value judgments, usually barely disguised in notions like 'harmony', 'unity', etc., and went on to draw moral or pedagogical conclusions from these 'objective' outcomes.

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[205] Cf. Eliot, "Shelley and Keats", in: *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 102.

[206] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent [1919]",in: *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 40.

[207] *Ibid*., p. 43.

[208] Cf. W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy [1945]" and "The Affective Fallacy [1959]", in: David Lodge, ed. *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader* (London: Longman: 1972), pp. 333-358.

What poststructuralist and deconstructive literary criticism gives back to the object of aesthetic communication and experience is the process character of meaning that is *produced* (cf. the emphasis on so-called 'signifying practices'), its radical contextuality, its literality as opposed to literarity, and the shift in accent from intention to reception and interpretation. Roland Barthes's 'death of the author' or rather of the incredulity towards the 'authorial function', is the political price (i.e. the persistence of ambiguity) that will have to be paid for the liberation and plurality of meaning and interpretation. The inherent romanticism of this gesture has not gone unnoticed. Its initial radicality is still all about self-assurance, only this time it is the confidence of a split self – the one that loses and finds itself in the process of poetic production and the other, who, through identification in reading, can be communicated and embodied. In this way, the poet's individualism passes over to the reader and Eliot's principle of impersonality becomes an issue at the other, the receiving and decoding end. Does an 'ideal' reader have to abandon, or suspend at least, his or her personality in order to, like the poet, hear the nightingale sing or even become (one with) it?

At this point one should probably recall once again Paul de Man's ideas about Romanticism, which say that Romantic literature invests general validity in an experience without ever breaking off the contact with the individual self in whom this experience first arose.[209] Again, one could take Keats as an example of Paul de Man's idea of rhetorical 'disfiguration'. In "Shelley Disfigured" (1979) de Man develops the notion that in Romantic poetry in particular there is a play of figuration in the use of rhetorical tropes (a process which constitutes the very ability of visual representation in a text) and disfiguration (to be understood as the very structure inherent in a text that erases these tropological meanings). As demonstrated, Keats's Ode is as much an act of remembrance as it is an act of forgetting, namely the forgetting of the I as a means of remembering. The nightingale functions as a metonymy, as a trope for the poetic process, which is why the nightingale and its meaning – i.e. the personification of the I – can neither be fully present nor absent. Instead it has a haunting ability, an entirely uncanny presence. Its only point is to create the illusion of self-presence and the guarantee of meaning, which nevertheless cannot be articulated. The conclusion that a deconstructive reading *à la* de Man would draw from this is that the I itself is nothing but an autobiographical trope (namely a *prosopopoeia*) that must constantly articulate and dearticulate itself.[210] De Man shows how prosopopoeia can indeed be taken as the general condition of all language, namely as the permanent construction of masks of human self-identity – a fact that manifests itself in particular through the repressive function at work in the ode's constant questioning. The poetic I with its autobiographical desire to be at-one-with-it's-self, or with its structure of *différance*, in fact becomes a constant process of self-annihilation, as de Man says in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*: "disfiguration is the forgetting of the trope as trope". Since Keats's Ode is an act of self-interpretation or an 'auto-communicative' act, or in de Man's words an "allegory of reading",[211] one is allowed to apply this insight to the reading of the poem itself, and arguably to any act of reading: reading is at once the appearance and disappearance of understanding. The price of understanding is thus the annihilation of the I, or permanent self-deconstruction.

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[209] Cf. Paul de Man's "Introduction to the Poetry of John Keats", in: De Man De Man, *Critical Writings 1953-1978* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 197.

[210] Cf. de Man's "Autobiography as De-Facement", in: De Man, De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

[211] Cf. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

The mentioned topicality of Keats, and his modern and postmodern interpreters from Eliot to de Man, lies in the fact that Keats's model of impossible self-realisation seems to have become the *standard* understanding of any autobiographical I. It is somewhat like the original trope of the modern and postmodern self or subject which constantly finds itself, and in finding itself, disappears or loses its self – an endless dialectic deferral of being-with-one's-self as promise, or, indeed, as one might call it: a 'self-treasuring'. It is in this context that de Man's comment on Keats in "An Introduction to the Poetry of John Keats" as a purely "future-oriented poet" begins to make sense.[212] The prospective questioning in Keats's poetry in general is the expression of a haunting dream whose truth always remains futural. Keats is the least narcissistic poet of English Romanticism because the deferral necessarily demands a forgetting of self, and *not* Wordsworthian introspection or self-reflexivity. Negative capability for Keats means empathy with the other or others as a replacement for an I, or a kind of self-undoing, but in a positive sense. Nothing is more despicable for Keats than the "sole self" or the 'habitual self'. For him the role of imagination is not finding an authentic self but the abandoning of the self, which is why he constantly faces the criticism of being irresponsible or lacking in 'self control'. Evidently, de Man would interpret the "forlorn" in the "Ode to a Nightingale" as that moment when the repressed 'real' self, parallel to Freud's notion of the unconscious, returns, and in doing so, destroys the poetic illusion of an auto-heterogenesis.

Treasuring the Self

> We have lost the *mystique* of the self.[213]

It is Romanticism's chief merit, according to de Man, to have shown that general philosophical insight has to be rooted in authentic self-understanding, or that self-assurance is the necessary first step towards any moral judgment. It is certainly no exaggeration that the big treasure hunt for the self has greatly intensified in the age of so-called '(postmodern) identity politics'. Postmodern society is obsessed with identity and views it – like its Romantic precursors – as task in the double meaning of '*Aufgabe*' in Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" (1968):[214] namely as task (or promise) and abandonment (or disappearance). The abandoning of the metaphysical Cartesian subject leads to an accumulation of minoritarian identities or, as Stuart Hall called it, "minimal selves".[215] Identity is not an essential given but the temporary end product of a continuous, uncompletable, process, literally a 'pro-ject'. Here is therefore Keats's continued but problematic relevance, because already in Keats are we shown the limits of this somewhat naive self-proliferation and self-stylisation.[216] The impossibility of identity – the self as disappearance and as promise, or as repression – is by no means made more tolerable through loss and celebrated pluralisation. On the contrary, the dispersal of the initial 'problem' only increases the desire for self-discovery – i.e. it intensifies the metaphysics of treasuring. The answer to the impossible quest for a unified self, one could argue, is already given by Keats himself, and this answer is, strictly speaking, an ethical one, almost in the radical sense given to ethics by Emmanuel Levinas, namely the insight that the self is itself a kind of answer to a prior question, i.e. that of the necessary precedence of the other for any self. Identity, precisely, is an effect, not a question, and alterity is its 'cause' – an assymetrical relation which turns every I into a hostage of the other. Or, in other words, the infinity of the I does not correspond to any totality. In opening itself up towards the other in the shape of a nightingale, or nature etc. and in becoming 'self-aware' through 'facing' an or the other, the Keatsean I also pre-empts another trend in contemporary literary and cultural criticism, a development one might call 'critically posthumanist', or 'post-anthropocentric', or even 'post-psychological. These latest 'postisms' also seem to find their expression, for example, in the shift towards cognitive, neuro- and eco-criticism.

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[212] Paul de Man De Man, *De Man, Paul (1989) Critical Writings 1953-1978* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

[213] Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 40.

[214] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968).

[215] Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves", *Identity: The Real Me, ICA Documents* 6 (1988): 134-138.

[216] It might be useful, in this context, to draw parallels between Mark Sandy's argument about Nietzsche's fundamental ambiguity towards Romanticism, and Romanticism in theory. Despite Nietzsche's apparent negative attitude towards Romanticism and art as "redemptive shelter from the

Keats's anti-Cartesian reference to the "dull brain" in the "Ode to a Nightingale" might be recalled here. It seems as if current literary criticism is attempting to overcome the fundamental gap between author, reading and text through new holistic, maybe even new monist, approaches. The holistic nature of the communicative or aesthetic-poetic process is being stressed once again, however this time without recourse to any humanist moral ideal of self-realisation or pedagogy. Instead the new understanding of the poetic process might resemble something like posthumanist neuropsychology. The new image of the human in the age of the demystified 'dull' brain no longer clearly distinguishes between the individual subject and its natural and cultural environment. Just as any I is the extension of an 'embodied mind', the body is a network of technical, cultural and natural extensions and interventions. Conscience, communication and aesthetics literally are complex effects of neural affects and Keats, the surgeon and student at United Hospitals, with its most advanced teachers in the new 'brain science' might have sensed this. Keats's "dull brain", which belatedly and in a state of perplexity capitulates in front of the immediacy of sensual experience because it ultimately cannot extricate itself from dualism's imprisonment – consciousness somehow always comes too late, brain and self never meet, even less do they become one. As Alan Richardson in *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (2001) explained,[217] the Romantic period witnesses the foundations of modern neurology. He coinsed the phrase "neural romanticism" with particular reference to Keats and especially his odes. One could even go so far, mindful of the Romantic beginnings of contemporary holistic-psychological approaches and posthumanist neuro-aesthetics, as to speak of Keats as the first 'neuro-mantic', or indeed 'Roman-tech'.

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suffering of existence", according to Sandy, "Nietzsche's own account of the self and world as involving fictions and fictionalising illuminates comparable concerns in the poetry of Keats and Shelley (Mark Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. vii). According to Sandy, the "Keatsean and Shelleyan treatment of poetic identity anticipate a Nietzschean understanding of the self as a site of conflict" (p. viii). Sandy insinuates the parallels between Nietzsche's (anti-)romanticism and Nietzsche's "re-absorption into theoretical literary commementaries on romanticism" in figures like Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, de Man, Bloom, Hartman and Hillis Miller (pp. 1-2).

[217] Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

What does all this mean for the treasure, and the self? Is the age of 'brain science' the ultimate loss of the 'mystique of the self', as Lionel Trilling called it? Does it spell the end of literature and poetry, or the generalisation of its secret, its fictionality? Is the Romantic irresistibility of theory a 'triumph' or a 'downfall', to recall de Man on theory's fate?[218] Is Nietzsche's proto-posthumanist image of human knowledge as 'beehive' really the end of any metaphysics of treasure and the triumph of nihilistic disenchantment? Let us ask the nightingale.

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[218] Paul de Man De Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

5 Yearning for the Human in Posthuman Times – On Albert Camus's Tragic Humanism

> Inasmuch as few epochs require as much as ours that one should be equal to the best as to the worst, I should like, indeed, to shirk nothing and to keep faithfully a double memory (…). There is this will to live without rejecting anything of life, which is the virtue I honor most in this world.[219]
>
> Il est à craindre que l'humanisme ne soit plus aujourd'hui qu'une référence littéraire et historique commode pour nous assurer de notre bonne conscience.[220]
>
> What's natural is the microbe. All the rest – health, integrity, purity (if you like) – is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter.[221]

While the calls for an 'exit strategy' from the global restrictions of (human) movement and social distancing introduced to avoid the spreading of the new Corona virus pandemic were getting louder, many politicians and virologists were advocating even tighter measures of confinement to slow down the number of new infections, to protect the vulnerable and to avoid the collapsing of overstretched and underfunded health care systems, overwhelmed by the prospect of further successive waves of the pandemic. At the same time it was becoming increasingly clear that economic interests were on a collision course with a humanitarian ethics of care and a weighing-up process had already begun that pitched the loss of human life to the virus against the loss of human life due to poverty as a result of a global economic and social lockdown. One could easily see the positioning process that was occurring in political circles ready to benefit once the crisis was over or at least relenting. Environmentalists (and advocates of 'degrowth') have been seeing the fall in economic activity and the decrease in carbon emissions and the temporary recovery of cities from air pollution in times of emptied streets as a sort of vindication of their protest marches: You see! It can be done, if a pandemic can reverse climate change by forcing us to downscale our economic activities we have to accept that, that's just what it takes! Just as easily you could see other ways of inflecting the pandemic: We've all got used to the idea that global finance capitalism will not be able to continue to generate wealth for ever more people and places, but hadn't it been so successful, politicians wouldn't have been able to throw vast amounts of money at the Corona crisis fall-out and at the development of a vaccine. So, it is not difficult to see how economists – after a due check on some global strategies that have proven exaggerated and unhelpful (e.g. just-in-time no-stock transnational production lines) – are wanting to return to wealth generation with a vengeance to make up for the huge losses and deficits that have built up in the past years, especially since the pandemic has now given way to a return to a forced attention to international conflict in both Ukraine and Palestine (not to mention the numerous more 'local' wars around the world that had to be repressed while the global media attention focused on the crisis 'at hand').

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[219] Albert Camus, "Return to Tipasa", *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1987), pp. 169-170.

[220] Jean-François Mattéi, "La crise de l'humanisme contemporain", in: Jean-Marc Aveline, ed., *Humanismes et religions: Albert Camus et Paul Ricoeur* (Münster: LIT, 2014), p. 36. It is to be feared that humanism today is merely a literary and historical reference point that remains convenient in assuring us of our good conscience (my translation).

[221] Albert Camus, *The Plague* [1947], trans. Stuart Gilbert (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 207. Further references will be given in the text as *P*.

Science also has done quite well out of the pandemic. Scientists have been making a comeback as public intellectuals and as the main source of prop-ups for stringent and often anti-constitutional and extremely unpopular, illiberal, political action. After decades of a steady global rise of populism, experts (at least some iconic ones) are back in the national and global media. The pandemic was also an opportune moment to look at the role of social media and the importance of a (national, European, international, global) public sphere, and once again it has become clear to what extent bogey advice and fake news have been shared as easily and virally as the virus itself through Facebook, YouTube, Twitter etc. and thus have indirectly contributed to the global death toll. And another community has been capitalising on the climate of 'bio(in)security', namely all those people who have been pointing at (human) biology as the weakest link in humanity's chance for survival and further evolutionary development. It is fairly easy to see how so-called 'transhumanists' for whom pandemics (apart from asteroids, catastrophic climate change but also future wars) are global risks of extinction that need to be countered with the right political and technological consensus to overcome this frustratingly disappointing 'human condition', this less than perfect 'mortal frame' of ours. In their eyes, it is almost a 'moral obligation' to technologically and thus ethically enhance ourselves and 'transcend' our current limits by extracting ourselves from 'nature' and its viruses.[222]

Given this explosive mix of antagonistic and opportunistic discourses it always was unlikely that the world after Corona would be in any way a better place. There have been calls to rebuild, to remember the essentials, or to be better prepared next time, to learn the lessons, to overcome, to celebrate life and so on. Calls for human solidarity have been encouraging a return to universal humanist values, a return to essential and timeless 'truths' and celebrations of the tragic but heroic beauty of human (self)sacrifice, calls for a new Enlightenment and optimism, onwards and upwards, a global 'rolling-up of sleeves' – all in the face of new military conflict and ever more pressing climate concerns. What there has of course not been much time for, however, is critical reflection of an existential, or ontological kind. Who is now still having time for questions like: what does it mean to be human, once 'humanity' has been '(re)united' in confronting an 'evil' and invisible enemy, a deadly virus, or war, or climate change?

In short, the pandemic and its aftermath has brought pandemonium to the globalised neoliberal capitalist world order and to liberal humanism alike. The result, one could say, is a state of 'pandemonics'. Pandemonium, as the *OED online* explains, refers to the "abode of all demons; hell, the infernal regions". It also means "a centre of vice and wickedness; a haunt of evil", and, "a place or state of utter confusion and uproar; a noisy disorderly place (…) a tumult; chaos". Etymologically, there is of course no convergence between pandemic and pandemonium. Pandemic goes back to *demos*, (the) people, while pandemonium derives from *daimon/daemonium*, the devil, which raises the question whether it would be evil to mix up these two etyma – people and devil, society and chaos, even though, some will argue that it is the *demos*, precisely, who has become the *daimon*, in the form of global overpopulation, for example. However the phrase 'pandemic pandemonium' obviously appeals because of its alliteration. There is, for example, an archived post by James C. O'Brien (Principal of the Albright Group LLC) from 2007 on the website of the online journal *Industry Today* that begins with what, today, has to be called a prophetic statement: "According to experts, including the World Health Organization (WHO), an influenza pandemic is inevitable. The pandemic will spread along supply chains, making businesses especially vulnerable to the disease and to measures taken to protect public health".[223] And there is a short article by Josh N. Ruxin (then an assistant clinical professor of public health) in *The National Interest* in 2008, equally prophetic with hindsight, which emphasises that "[t]oday's pandemics have evolved to prey on our greatest weakness: our inability to wage sustained fights against pressing health issues".[224] Ruxin's call for a (not entirely disinterested) proactive approach to public health clearly combines the social, economic and humanitarian costs of a pandemic threat: "it may be worthwhile to consider how a pandemic could push people living on the edge into poverty and starvation. With food production suffering greatly, the urban centers that are dependent on daily imports of food could rapidly fall victim (…) the economic and potential political destabilization that would result would cross these borders and be felt in everyone's bank accounts".[225] And they did not fail to do so, of course, even though some bank accounts have actually grown as a result.

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[222] A fairly representative view on the "dangers for the world after (COVID-19)" appeared in a number of new magazines and manifestos explaining the new world scenario. There was for example *Le Spectacle du monde* 2 (Autumn 2020) that identified the pandemic, transhumanism and demography (i.e. overpopulation) as the main global challenges. The collective authors of the *Second manifeste convivialste* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2020) argued for a 'post-neoliberal' world that should be ecologically responsible, for degrowth (*décroissance*) and for a post-market oriented (*démarchandisation*) post-globalisation (*déglobalisation*), and against technoscientific *hubris*.

While these two visions, contracting pandemic and pandemonium, are thoroughly materialist and secular, one might say, I am equally interested in the metaphysical, 'religious' connotations of pandemonium because they are connected to what I find most striking about the co-implication of a sanitary and a civilisational crisis in the way many commentators seem to have instrumentalised COVID-19, from the variety of angles outlined above. Collapsologists, consequently, see the sanitary crisis with its political and socioeconomic fallout and the possibility of 'the end of civilization' as an ecological chance, or at least as a welcome and overdue wake-up call for humanity to rethink its relationship to other species and to the planet. Even someone as poised as Philippe Descola, in an interview with *Le Monde*, joined the widespread apocalyptism by saying "Nous [i.e. Western capitalist 'man', I assume] sommes devenus des virus pour la planète".[226]

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[223] James O'Brien, "Pandemic Pandemonium", *Industry Today* 11.1 (2016), available online at: industrytoday.com/pandemic-pandemonium/; last accessed 12/12/2023.

[224] Josh N. Ruxin, "Pandemic Pandemonium", *The National Interest* 96 (2008): 26.

[225] Ruxin, pp. 27-28.

[226] Philippe Descola, "Nous sommes devenus des virus pour la planète – entretien", *Le Monde* 21-22 May (2020) : 27.

That humans might be the real virus or disease on and for this planet has become somewhat of a posthumanist topos at least since Agent Smith in the *Matrix* called 'us' that to 'our' (i.e. 'Mr. Anderson's') face. 'Viral' thinking or information going 'viral' have now been central metaphors for digitalisation for a while. Like every major crisis a global pandemic is the bearer of both hope (for change) and dejection (extinction angst). It produces both nihilist (we're all going to die anyway) and idealist (we can build a better world) reactions. While most of the high-visibility thinkers used COVID-19 to justify their own conceptualisations of and agendas for social critique – from a more affirmative biopolitics to postanthropocentric solidarity to compositionism, entanglement, degrowth or anarchism, to transhumanist calls for technological 'optimisation' of humans, the 'ecosystem planet' – it might be worth gaining some detachment and thus some critical distance to escape the frenzied preoccupation with the question whether the human, or the planet or both have a future and remember how 'we' got into this pandem(on)ic mess and what brought 'us' here.

Pandemics, like all natural and unnatural disasters, bring out the best and worst in humans – and thus touch the core of their self-understanding, that is their humanism, whether it be of a secular, atheist or religious inflection, including of course any 'posthumanist' attempt to escape them. This double human 'nature', the best and the worst, this *psychomachia* (the fight between good and evil, forcing the individual to make the 'right' choice), is at the heart of humanist morality. It is based on the idea that the experience of tragedy will produce an improvement (*catharsis* – a cleansing and an at least temporary release, from suffering, dilemma, etc.). In the face of the absurdity (of the cruelty, evil, death, suffering and injustice) in this world, becoming *truly* human is the main *task* for each and every human. This moral imperative is fundamental to a tragic humanism and it could be seen everywhere at work, again or still, during the COVID-19 global crisis. It is a well-rehearsed human gut reaction to the absurdity and inscrutability of evil (the problem of theodicy) and the *outrage* they cause.

Many like-minded people with a self-critical (theoretical, philosophical) disposition ('humanists', in the old philological sense, basically), after the onset of the pandemic, reached back on their analogue or digital bookshelves to pull out their Foucault volumes. Others remembered their literary (humanist) education and reached for their Camus. This is not to say that these reactions are mutually exclusive but they translate into different foci. The Foucauldian route led to a critique or a genealogy of the disciplinary apparatuses, the politics of power and administration and the scopic regimes put in place to create human 'subjects' and 'docile bodes'. The Camusian route emphasised the metaphysical revolt of this human 'subject' in the face of absurd suffering and his (mostly his) attempt to overcome it in solidarity and love.[227] What follows below, however, is not meant as another such contribution to literary criticism. It is not a valorisation of the greatness of Camus's work, which is in fact difficult to classify, between philosophy, literature, drama and journalism. It is also not another comment on whether Camus should or shouldn't be taken seriously as a philosopher. On the other hand, it is also not a contribution on the sociological, political or ecological impact of COVID-19. It is also not about 'the virus' *per se*. It is an attempt to show that posthumanism – at least the form of it that I have been designating as 'critical' (CPH) – is not all about technology, the new alliance between science and the humanities, biopolitical entanglement, new challenges like climate change and extinction threats. It is all of that of course, but it feeds, necessarily, out of something else; something that is often forgotten in the breathless race towards who is most serious about 'postanthropocentrism'. Something that is the motivation of why one should engage with a thinking that is so arcane and complicated as 'posthumanism' (or 'postanthropocentrism') in the first place, namely its ongoing critique if humanism, the desire to understand what *went* wrong, and what (still) *is* wrong, with our most cherished values and self-understandings and whether this is really just a Western 'problem' of troubled and melancholic self-searching souls. These are questions that not only concern what it *is* but also what it *means* to be human, or what a *good* life is and which way *evil* lies. This posthumanism of a more critical in the sense of genealogical kind is not nostalgic, or only a little in tone maybe but not in spirit, it is not technophobic but it refuses to answer the question of technology in a deterministic or essentialist way. It is not religious either, even though it does read the postsecular not as a straightforward turn away from the modern and enlightened, political notion of secularism. It is in this deconstructive vein that I think Camus and the controversy to what extent he was or wasn't an *existentialist* and whatever happened to this existentialism (i.e. to what extent it should still inform 'us' today), are relevant for the discussion about where COVID-19 (and other crises since) has taken 'us', and might take 'us' still. So, this is an intervention on how aspects of humanism – which might well prove to be unsurpassable – are still governing 'our' thinking despite 'our' best intentions maybe, or 'our' most insistent repressions.

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[227] In fact, the two routes can be found in Camus's work as well. Camus' play, *État de siège*, one might argue is much more focused and the administrative power shift, the aspect of 'governmentality', while his novel, *The Plague*, focuses on the drama of 'separation' from a more strictly humanist and tragic angle as a metaphysical revolt. See also Matthew Sharpe's *Camus, Philosophe: To Return to Our Beginnings* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), esp. chapter 1 ("Plague Power: Camus with and against the Critiques of Instrumental reason", pp. 61-97). Camus's *État de siège* (1948) appeared almost at the same time as *La Peste* (1947), in Camus, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II (1944-1948) (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), pp. 91-373.

From the Absurd to Revolt

> [O]ne cannot help but be struck by the ethical force of Camus's works.[228]

Albert Camus's *The Plague* is without doubt still the most obvious modern literary reference for a humanist scenario playing itself out in the context of an epidemic. It emplots the (originally gnostic) task to become or remain fully human in the face of annihilation, to search for the human in inhuman or one might say posthuman times.[229] It is through witnessing and accepting the fact of death and through experiencing the humiliation of endless defeat while facing the merciless epidemic that Doctor Rieux and his comrades impersonate the idea of human *révolte*. Out of the experience of absurdity arises the need to act, and thus to embark on a quest for a better, more human, world. Arguably, most of 'us' have internalised this story in some form; it is therefore almost impossible not to somehow 'believe' in it; it seems without alternative. It is the age-old yearning for transcendence that drives it, whether this yearning is instrumentalised in the form of technological development, the idea of social progress, or the morality of human perfectibility, from Christian notions of resurrection to Nietzsche's overman to transhumanist prophesies of enhancement and the evolutionary replacement of humans by a superior AI.

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[228] David Sherman, *Camus* (Chichester: Wiley & Sons, 2009), p. 7.

[229] On the question of gnosticism and theodicy in connection with Camus see Josephine Donovan's study *Gnosticism in Modern Literature: A Study of the Selected Works of Camus, Sartre, Hesse, and Kafka* (New York: Garland: 1990). See also Matthew Sharpe's more recent "The Black Side of the Sun: Camus, Theology, and the Problem of Evil", Political Theology 15.2 (2014): 151-174. It is worth remembering that Camus completed his studies with a thesis on "Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme", in: *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. I (1931-1944) (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), pp. 999-1081 containing a chapter on the gnostics.

The return to Camus in the time of the 'plague' might be very predictable, as predictable as the reaction of future-oriented *post*- and, even more likely, *trans*humanists who have been arguing for a technical fix to human suffering for a long time to distance themselves from such a seemingly reactionary and moralistic move that seems stuck in a 'can't do' or 'can't chaange' attitude as far as the 'human condition' is concerned. There have certainly been conservative motivations in rereading *La Peste* where, on some occasions, it was framed as an example of how to retain one's humanity in the face of suffering, as an answer to a "yearning for ordinary humanity and good sense",[230] a call for "decency and fidelity" and the need to "hold on to our humanity" in the face of the "*fléau*", or "evil" by way of "vigilance".[231] But there were also much more nuanced reminders, especially the one by Jacqueline Rose.[232] Rose reminded 'us' of the complexity of Camus's novel and its reception – a text that Camus intended to have at least three levels: an almost anthropological level of how people behave when faced with an epidemic and suffering; a symbolic level dealing with Nazi ideology, practice, bureaucracy and camp mentality (preceding Foucault, Agamben and the entire discussion on 'bare life' and biopolitics); and a metaphysical-theological level that explores the problem of evil and the question of theodicy from a (post)secular angle (i.e. after Nietzsche's 'death of god'). Rose also put her finger on what may be the two most significant absences in *The Plague*, namely the literal absence of Oran's Arab population and Camus's complicated positioning as a *pied-noir*, a French-Algerian, in connection with colonial and postcolonial politics, and thus the problematic relationship between (post)humanism and (post)colonialism more generally, as well as the low visibility and subservient, accessory role of women in Camus's work and existentialism more widely. However, the chord that *The Plague* cannot help but strike even today lies in the narrator's (i.e. the medical doctor Rieux's) final, carefully crafted, both tragic and hopeful, message that the epidemic leaves behind, namely that "there are more things to admire in men than to despise". This is a statement that encapsulates the entire posthumanist problematic in that it may be precisely this arch-humanist consensus that is no longer tenable or even desirable or, at least, that has become suspicious. And one way, precisely, in which it has become suspicious, from a feminist point of view, lies in the use of the word 'men'. Men, deep down, will still think that there is something desirable about them in the hope that at least some women (and men, or other) will agree. It is all thus still to decide or to 'play for', as Rose says, and "so much to be done".[233]

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[230] Cf. Robert Zaretsky, "Out of a clear blue sky: Camus's *The Plague* and coronavirus", *TLS* (10 April 2020): available online at: www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/albert-camus-the-plague-coronavirus-essay-robert-zaretsky/; last accessed 12/12/2023.

[231] Stephen Metcalf, "Albert Camus' *The Plague* and our own Great Reset", *Los Angeles Times* (23 March 2020): available online at www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2020-03-23/reading-camus-the-plague-and-coronavirus; last accessed 31/05/2020.

[232] Jacqueline Rose, "Pointing the Finger: Jacqueline Rose on *The Plague*", *London Review of Books* 42.9 (7 May 2020): available online at www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n09/jacqueline-rose/pointing-the-finger; last accessed 12/12/2023.

Camus's work is often described – based on his own classification of it into different 'cycles' – by a development "from absurdity to revolt".[234] Absurdity arises out the fact that after (Nietzsche's) 'death of God' the human finds him- or herself alone in this world. This causes a deep moral crisis, the loss of transcendent and religious values and the experience of meaninglessness and nihilism. Instead of a liberation, the absence of God leads to a lack of a sense of direction, and ultimately to a reduction of freedom and a loss of dignity. An absurd life is a life where everything is permitted but nothing makes sense in the only 'safe' knowledge that there is death at the end of life. There are only two options: revelling or rebelling, to put it starkly. Either one lamentingly accepts the absurdity of life and becomes a nihilist or one takes absurdity as a starting point for a revolt against this very absurdity and denies its nihilistic conclusion. The challenge is thus to accept life's absurdity and derive positive and constructive values and a limited notion of freedom out of this collective nihilistic depression.[235] However, this affirmative new humanism must refrain from seeking new transcendental values outside of the human. It is purely immanent in its radical anthropocentrism, however, not in a materialist, mercantile or capitalist sense, which seeks the significance of life in the accumulation of wealth or consumption, but in close connection with nature. However, this is not to be confused with a romanticised ecological notion in Camus's case for whom nature is utterly ambivalent in its 'inhumanity'. Consciousness of absurdity, nature's inhuman beauty and the acceptance of death as the ultimate limit can be the only ground for developing a set of values on which to build a community of humans and obtain solidarity. The individual experience of absurdity leads to consciousness and to metaphysical revolt, out of which arises the experience of community in suffering and which, in turn, stirs the collective fight against evil in this world. It is basically a cathartic or tragic vision which derives intrinsic collective human grandeur from the individual (but shared) experience of suffering, of death but also scorn, persistence and strength in adversity, authenticity, integrity and dignity, in one word: it is heroic in its meekness – a "lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert".[236] The experience of absurdity should lead to lucidity and to an affirmation of life despite all. In this sense, "living is keeping the absurd alive".[237] The "divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints" should lead to a "nostalgia for unity" and coherence.[238] Suicide, self-annihilation, withdrawal, acceptance, all amount to a betrayal of the injunction to pursue happiness in the face of evil. This is also the main message of *The Plague* – to be resolutely on the side of the victims while putting up a fight against evil without delusion, accepting absurdity without becoming complicit with or even adding to it.

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[233] Martin Crowley also points out the 'masculinist bias' in Camus' "particular version of humanism, in which virility and fraternity are often key values"; cf. Martin Crowley, "Camus and Social Justice", in: Edward J. Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 93.

[234] Cf. for example John Foley's, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt* (London: Routledge, 2014). Tad Sessler sees in this development a move from solipsistic nihilism to immanent humanism and links this to the 'ethical turn' in Camus and Levinas; see Sessler, *Levinas and Camus: Humanism for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Continuum, 2008).

[235] This is the main message of Camus's "Lettres à un ami allemand", in: *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II (1944-1948) (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), pp. 1-29.

[236] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* [1942], trans. Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 7.

[237] *Ibid*., p. 53.

From an existentialist point of view, in the absence of God, all the meaning is for humans to produce. Against the destructive movement of history the only option is this desperate (tragic, heroic, sisyphean) hope combined with an utopian desire without illusion – on which all remaining human dignity relies – al in the hope of human freedom. This yearning manifests itself in the individual's endeavour to overcome 'his' alienation and thus to show 'fraternity' and create solidarity with the victims (of persecution, of cruelty, absurdity).[239] The sanitary fight against the deadly microbe is therefore, at the same time, a form of political resistance and a moral duty. It is a fight against indifference and for freedom for which self-delusion and ideological division is itself a pernicious form of death. Revolt against the human condition is based on this existential(ist) recognition of the human (double) nature. Nevertheless*,* more and more humans are becoming aware that all of this is not only a rather self-righteous, self-indulgent and nostalgic misconception of what solidarity might mean, it is a worldview that is also increasingly becoming a threat for the planet and nonhuman, as well as human, survival. Hence the urgent need for a shift towards a *critical* posthumanism understood as the ongoing critique and deconstruction of humanism.

Tragic Humanism and The Plague

> [C]réer les conditions d'une pensée juste et d'un accord provisoire entre les hommes qui ne veulent être ni des victimes ni des bourreaux.[240]

In *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*,[241] I investigated 'our' ongoing love-hate relationship with humanism, which continues to manifest itself in an absurdist belief based on nostalgia, revolt and the yearning for something entirely other – another planet, another life, another freedom – and which seems to 'get us' every time, and especially in moments of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. But why, indeed, should this be a surprise? Humanism is humanity's greatest (and most dangerous) achievement – itself an ideology, a set of values, a worldview that is now increasingly turning against 'us', in the face of ever more threatening global crises, extinction *angst*, human-induced climate change, new genocides, global refugee movements, in short unending human and nonhuman suffering. And the central question remains: What to do about ‘it’? And also: what to do about ‘us’? How may reading Camus (still) help in this situation which seems irresolvable? How to learn to mistrust and avoid the very humanist gestures that keep returning precisely at the moment one starts believing (hoping?) to have left them behind?

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[238] *Ibid.*, 50.

[239] It is worth pointing out the tacit 'masculinist' (or at least paternalistic) consensus that much of existentialism, humanism and (French) republicanism presupposes.

[240] Camus, "Ni victimes ni bourreaux", *Actuelles – Écrits politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 123. [T]o create the conditions for a thinking this is just and a provisional agreement between humans who wish to be neither victims nor perpetrators (my translation).

[241] Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013; the original German version was published under the title *Posthumanismus – Eine kritische Einführung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009).

The least one could say about Camus’s relationship to humanism – and this is what he shares with today’s critical posthumanists – is that he was disappointed by it. He was disappointed by the Christian humanism of a Kierkegaard or a Mauriac, which, in the face of the ‘human condition’ through a kind of ‘leap of faith’ emphasised the ‘humanity’ of God in Christ and elevated human suffering into a form of divine selection and salvation. He was disappointed by the atheist humanism of existentialists like Sartre, as well as by that of Marxism, even though he shared their premise that ‘human(e)ness’ (especially in inhuman, totalitarian, nihilistic times) remains the greatest value in need of protection. However, he distanced himself of any human ‘divinisation’, the idea of a Nietzschean ‘overman’, or any kind of political absolutism in the name of which humans may continue to commit violence against other humans. The best way to describe Camus’s very particular humanism is by emphasising the importance of finding a moral response to the evil of human suffering through an emphasis on human solidarity without, however, compromising human freedom and dignity.

Camus’s generation witnessed first-hand what the threat of nihilism means and how quickly political ideals can turn into nightmares. Camus’s humanism is tragic, because, precisely, it has gone through the experience of despair. As he said about his generation in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize for literature in Stockholm, in 1957:

> They have had to forge for themselves an art of living through times of catastrophe, in order to be reborn, and then to fight openly against the death-instinct which is at work in our time.[242]

It is the experience of the absurd, evil, suffering and death in this world that provokes the temptation of nihilism that needs to be resisted by a humanist renewal expressed in revolt and solidarity. Camus looks to the life-affirming tradition in classical Greek philosophy and morality – a tradition he sees perpetuated in Mediterranean thought and nature – to accept the ambivalence of human existence. Humans are capable of, as well as subject to, the ‘best’ and the ‘worst’, and they are thus condemned to choose between them in the absence of absolute knowledge. They are subject both to love and despair. In a world where innocent children are suffering and dying (for example, from epidemics like the plague, or war, or climate change) the problem of theodicy (i.e. if God is ‘good’ and ‘just’, why does he let evil happen to the obviously ‘innocent’?) highlights the existential absurdity of the human condition. Camus, however, sees in this no justification for some kind of desperate faith (as Father Paneloux advocates in *The Plague*) nor for a nihilist ‘anything goes’, or indeed, a complicity with violence. The revolt Camus increasingly comes to advocate in his writings after his first cycle of works is born from the experience of this absurd and the resistance to it, the *scorn* that Sisyphus shows of his tragic fate imposed by the gods – and which is why despite his suffering one must ‘imagine Sisyphus happy’. John Cruickshank aptly summarises the

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[242] Cited in John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus – And the Literature of Revolt* (New York: Galaxy, 1960), p. x.

"three values ultimately derived from the apparently purely negative experience of the absurd itself":

> First, there is the individual's discovery of the part of himself which he holds to be important, which he identifies as his essence as a human being, in the name of which he confronts the absurdity of human existence – the value, we might say, of the individual human worth. Second, the individual shares with other men this worth which he discovers in himself and this fact leads him to a second value – a common human nature. Third, this value takes him directly to the idea of the bond which links all men in face of the absurd – the value of human solidarity.[243]

The answer to this individual and collective revolt (which Camus expresses in a transformation of Descartes's *cogito* – I rebel, therefore we are), however, cannot lie in some kind of religious or political community seeking 'transcendence'. It needs to be achieved not 'vertically' but 'horizontally', so to speak, in the pursuit of happiness in this life and in the pursuit of (social) justice based on (human) solidarity.

If one accepts this sketch of Camus's very specific 'take' on humanism (which, as I would argue, however, has become widely influential and constitutes one of the 'go-to' value systems whenever 'the West' is confronted with a crisis, or is reminded of the 'evil' of human suffering, injustice, or a lack of solidarity when faced with a shared 'human condition') it will be beneficial to look at how this Camusian 'system' of values has fared and maybe developed over time – in particular, from Camus's untimely death in 1960 and the emerging 'anti-humanism' of the decade that followed it, up to today, with the emergence and acceptance of various strands of 'posthumanism'. In this chapter I will of course only be able to provide a very selective and sketchy picture.

Paul de Man in a brief article in 1965 commenting on the English translation of Camus's *Notebooks* noticed the "subtle change that separates the intellectual atmosphere of the fifties from that of the sixties", and that can be "measured by one's attitude toward the work and the person of Albert Camus".[244] De Man discovered a "deliberate, controlled style (...) behind a pseudoconfessional tone that serves to obscure, rather than to reveal, his true self" in the *Notebooks,* revealing an "irresolute man" lamenting a solitude that is "most of all an estrangement from what he considers his authentic former self".[245] "The more he gets involved with others, with social issues and public forms of thought and action, the more he feels a loss of contact with his true being".[246] What De Man derives from this very selective reading mostly based on Camus's first, absurdist, cycle, becomes one of the cornerstones of antihumanist critique, namely the decentring of the liberal humanist (individual) self:

> There never is any doubt in [Camus's] mind that the source of all values resides in the individual, in his ability to resist the monstrous encroachments that history makes upon his integrity. And for Camus this integrity, which he strove to shelter from totalitarian

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[243] Cruickshank, xvii.

[244] Paul de Man, "The Mask of Albert Camus (1965)", in: *Critical Writings, 1953-1978*, ed. Lindsey Waters (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 145.

[245] *Ibid*., pp. 145-146.

[246] *Ibid*., p. 148.

> and deterministic forms of thought, is founded in man's capacity for personal happiness.[247]

The authenticity of this 'self' that Camus derives from his experience of his Algerian-Mediterranean youth is founded on an intimate bond with nature for which the awareness of 'others' is an interruption of a sacred moment of unity. De Man specifically refers to a pre-absurdist piece in *Noces* where Camus writes, in 1937, of a harmony between the self 'without humanity' and nature 'without man' – both *topoi* that have become the preoccupation of current posthumanist *ecological* worldviews:

> The great truth the world patiently teaches us is that heart and mind are nothing. And that the stone warmed by the sun, or the cypress magnified by the blue of heaven are the limits of the only world in which being right has a meaning: nature without man (…). It is in that sense that I understand the word 'nakedness' [*dénuement*]. 'To be naked' always contains a suggestion of physical freedom and I would eagerly convert myself to this harmony between hand and flower, to this sensuous alliance between the earth and man freed from humanity if it were not already my religion.[248]

Camus' early 'religion' – a very pagan, maybe vaguely pantheist one, based mostly on Greek naturalism, Neoplatonism and a gnostic disposition – is not only the most fundamental source of his own and somewhat contradictory humanism ('without' humanity, it seems). It is what anchors him in his experience as French-Algerian *pied noir*, as a member of the *petit colons* and his upbringing in utter poverty but 'blessed' by a natural environment bathed in the light and warmth of the Mediterranean sun. Even though De Man was writing his damning piece on Camus in 1965, five years after Camus's death, in the middle of the period of decolonisation and the Algerian War of independence from France, he does not refer to Camus's own personal tragic experience of exile from what he always considered his 'home' (i.e. French Algeria). Instead De Man criticises Camus for his nostalgic and 'antimodern' stance which he, curiously, links to his 'goalkeeper's' mindset:

> The melancholy that reigns in the *Notebooks* reminds one of Camus's youthful sadness on the soccer field: too solitary to join the others up front, but not solitary enough to forego being a member of the team, he chose to be the goalkeeper of a society that was in the process of suffering a particularly painful historical defeat. One could hardly expect someone in that difficult position to give a lucid account of the game.[249]

This critique, with the benefit of hindsight, is of course particularly 'rich' from someone who, very much unlike Camus, was on the side of the Nazi collaborators rather than the resistance. And whatever one might think of goalkeepers and their role they always ultimately tend to receive the blame for defeat and their mistakes are usually very costly. Their experience of the sociality of the 'game' is certainly different from that of field players but to castigate them for a lack of 'solidarity' clearly goes too far. De Man here seems to be wilfully silencing Camus's political role as influential post-War intellectual and also his (unsuccessful) attempts to mediate in the struggle for Algerian independence between advocates for an all Muslim state and a secular and cosmopolitan republic with some French influence maintained.

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[247] *Ibid*.

[248] Camus, *Noces* [1937] suivi de *L'été* (Paris : Gallimard, 1959); quoted and translated in De Man, The Mask of Albert Camus", p. 149.

[249] De Man, "The Mask of Albert Camus", p. 152.

Raymond Williams, one year later, in 1966, is much more sympathetic to Camus's (and Sartre's) "tragic despair and revolt". In his study of modern tragedy Williams uses Camus to demonstrate what he as a Marxist and cultural materialist sees as the necessary "transition from a liberal to a social humanism".[250] He singles out Camus as a "writer and humanist [who] put all his strength into going beyond that point at which humanism is supposed to break down into despair".[251] Williams sees Meursault, Camus's 'stranger',[252] as a tragic figure who has lost connections with others and thus with social reality while retaining an intense awareness of himself in other respects. He is emblematic of the absurdity of modern alienation. The tragic conclusion that Williams derives from Meursault's (as well as from Caligula's misanthropy)[253] is that the 'inner freedom' of the individual, the consciousness of the absurdity of this world, cannot be experienced as freedom if it is against other people/without others, which he sees as a justification, for Camus, to replace "liberal humanism" with "tragic humanism".[254] The main problem for Williams lies in Camus' extrapolation from individual to collective experience, however. He refers to a central and "honest ambiguity" in Camus' work which "recognizes the sources of this [tragic, human] condition in particular circumstances, and yet also asserts that it is absolute".[255]

> For any man, his own particular condition is absolute. To argue otherwise is to reject actual men. Yet the assertion of an absolute condition as *common* is something else again. We have to ask how much rhetoric, how much lying rhetoric, is involved in that almost unnoticeable transition, under the power of art, from absolute to common.[256]

Williams, one of the fathers of cultural studies, here criticises Camus – and liberal humanism more generally – for his ideological-aesthetic move, from the absolutisation of individual experience to a social politics based on commonality, or in other words, he demythologises the surreptitious move that every humanism has to make, namely deriving a shared from an individual experience by universalising it. In doing so, humanism elides difference which it represses through the "power of representation" (i.e. "lying rhetoric", or the "power of art"), again encapsulated, for Williams, in Camus's neo-Cartesian move from absurdity to revolt: "I *rebel*, therefore we *exist*".[257] Similarly, Camus's *The Plague* is characterised by "a common process of collective suffering" and a "condition of common exile" which, in the case of Doctor Rieux, the narrator, brings out the ultimate conviction that "there are more things to admire in men than to despise".[258] This is the fundamental belief of an 'insistent humanism' that refuses to give in to despair and is committed to 'healing' in the face of a 'tragic condition' against which the revolt is made and which informs Camus's view of justice. It is a view that suffering and violence are as inevitable as they are unjustifiable.

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[250] Raymond Williams, "Tragic Despair and Revolt: Camus, Sartre", *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), p. 174.
[251] *Ibid*., p. 176.
[252] Camus, *L'Étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942).
[253] Camus, *Caligula* [1942] suivi de *Le malentendu* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1958).
[254] Williams, "Tragic Despair and Revolt", p. 178.
[255] *Ibid*., p. 179.
[256] *Ibid*., p. 181.
[257] *Ibid*.
[258] *Ibid*., p. 182.

Where Williams departs from Camus (and where he seems to prefer Camus's contemporary critics, especially Sartre) is his tendency towards metaphysical a-historicism (something that Roland Barthes also famously reproached Camus with in his review of *The Plague*). As a cultural materialist, Williams finds Camus's metaphysical transcendence of historical action to promote a "sense of history outside history", "disturbing":

> For the reality we have to face in the end is that while history is an abstraction it is still an abstraction from the actual lives of ourselves and others. There is a point at which the refusal of history, the limitation of significance to the personally known and affirmed, becomes in effect the refusal of others, and this also can be evasion and even complicity.[259]

From a Marxist, material and historicist point of view one could say (with Sartre, endorsed by Williams) that "Camus was ostensibly in revolt against historical suffering, he was less concerned to end this than to find a personally satisfying position: a metaphysical revolt against eternal injustice".[260] Williams ultimately locates an underlying 'problem' in existentialism's ambivalent attitude towards nature (as either matter to be dominated or indifferent, resistant, inhuman(e)) and concludes that what is absent in Camus is that "there is no sense of common process or common life, and this, itself an analogue of individualism, leads inevitably to despair".[261] Williams nevertheless ultimately underwrites Camus's tragic humanism as the modern world view that is or at least was the most adequate diagnosis of his time (i.e. the 1950s and 60s). But the question for him remains as to "whether this is really as far as we can go, whether under the weight of a common suffering this is our own last word".[262]

Jumping from these two early assessments to more contemporary readings 'after (antihumanist, postructuralist) theory', so to speak: one of the most comprehensive contemporary reassessments of Camus's life and work can be found in the already cited *Camus, philosophe: To Return to Our Beginnings* by Matthew Sharpe (2015). As its subtitle indicates, Sharpe believes that Camus's continued relevance lies in the way he reconnects modernity and humanism with its Greek origins. The 'modern' Camus is the one who together with his entire generation looked into the nihilistic 'abyss', the 'pre- and postmodern' Camus looks both ahead and back as an incorrigible humanist and moralist. It was his moralism in the face of absurdity, evil and revolt which made him look completely *dépassé* shortly after his death, "in the heroic eras of structuralism and post-structuralism after 1960 in France, and the generations of the 'theoretical turn' influenced by these movements in the UK, US, Australia and globally", as Sharpe explains.[263] However, it is precisely this moral affirmation

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[259] *Ibid*., p. 184.

[260] *Ibid*.

[261] *Ibid*., p. 189.

[262] *Ibid*.

[263] Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe*, p. 4.

(of the human, the world, nature etc.) in reaction to the absurd, suffering, injustice and death – the core of his tragic humanism – which again seems to chime with certain aspects of contemporary 'posthumanist' thinking. Sharpe provides a very colourful portrait of Camus's janus-faced reception which is worth quoting at length:

> Camus' divided reception bespeaks the singularity of Camus' thought and writing as an author both Algerian *pied noir* and proudly republican; both Mediterranean and European; philosophically trained yet famed as a *litterateur*; deeply "of his times" yet drawn to ancient paradigms; a man of sentiment yet legatee to "a certain kind of dry, plain, contemplative rationalism, which is typically French" [Sartre's words]; a *résistant* moved by solidarity with the political struggles of his contemporaries, while longing for the solitary leisure characteristic of what less interesting times called the *vita contemplativa*; hedonist and humanist; a thinker inveterately sceptical of all totalising philosophical systems, yet an unfailing defender of the life of the mind; one of the first, most powerful critics of French barbarities in Algeria, yet unable to endorse complete French withdrawal from its colonial possession; a man of the Left, yet increasingly anti-Stalinist; a figure acutely moved by what one early essay names "the love of life", but a love whose *envers* in all his writings is a nearly-tactile sense of the transience of things, the reality of senseless suffering, and the proximity of death.[264]

It is worth reminding at this stage that my aim in this chapter is not the same as Sharpe's. Even though it is difficult not to admire Camus as a 'great writer' and a 'great man', two very humanist reactions indeed, always disputable and calling for relativisation, the objective here is to use Camus's as a representative 'position' – a cultural option, so to speak, namely that of a 'tragic humanism' in the face of adversity and crisis, which remains a tempting route to follow whenever faced with apocalypse, extinction and crises like a global pandemic etc. It is precisely because Camus is such a strong defender of 'liberal values' like individual freedom, social justice, pluralism and dialogue, democratic republicanism, the rule of law and so on in the very face of catastrophe, that his 'tragic humanism' again can appear attractive to many, who are always willing to return to and affirm liberal humanist values and even hoping to extend them in the face of adversity. And it is precisely this desire to reconnect with these values (while never really having disconnected from them) that needs to be investigated by CPH, now, again. Why do these values retain their strong attraction when we know that the hope and the universal appeal they offer have such a bad track record in learning from their own mistakes, their exclusions, their nostalgia, their *ressentiments*, as Nietzsche would say?

The appeal most probably lies in Camus's struggle for 'authenticity' and the consciousness of his own ambivalence, as described by Sharpe above: the desire to be 'himself' all the while deeply 'caring' about others' and humanity's fate in general. As Jacob Golomb writes, Camus is the "last thinker of authenticity", who by an "act of lucidity" understands his "desire for unity" and his "need for clarity and coherence".[265] In a time when the human in the humanist sense is threatened with disappearance – literally and conceptually – Camus's tragic or desperate attempt to seek assurance for the human gains a renewed *grandeur* in the desire to be (or to become) human, after all:

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[264] *Ibid*., p. 5.

[265] Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 168-169; quoting Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 45.

> But I know that something in the world has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one. The world has at least the truth of man, and our task is to provide its justification against itself.[266]

Camus's cry of revolt remains a "fundamental expression of the universal, transcultural human desire for unity", Sharpe claims.[267] In a world facing "ecological collapse, resource shortages, species extinctions, the superexploitation of the South, the liberal-plutocratic eclipse of democratic will-formation, the rise and rise of forms of state-based and extremist terrorism, and the growing of states' security and surveillance apparati", Camus's is a "kind of measured, neoclassical naturalism and humane thinking that the world today cannot very much longer do without".[268] Impossible, it seems, to argue with this, and yet…

Today's Plague

> Je tiens au monde par tous mes gestes, aux hommes par toute ma pitié et ma reconnaissance. Entre cet endroit et cet envers du monde, je ne veux pas choisir, je n'aime pas qu'on choisisse.[269]

The Plague belongs to Camus's second cycle of works which he named "The World of Tragedy and the Spirit of Revolt" and which followed on from the cycle of "The Absurd".[270]

In keeping with this cycle's exploration of tragedy and revolt, *La Peste* chronicles the imprisonment, exile, oppression and suffering experienced by the citizens of Oran when plague strikes. Yet the novel also dramatizes the victory of human spirit and solidarity over that which would threaten and dismember it: a plague, an enemy occupation, existence itself.[271]

However, it is also a great drama of separation and solitude (the narrator, Doctor Rieux, is separated from his wife; Rambert is separated from the woman he loves; and virtually all inhabitants of Oran are brutally separated from their dead loved ones; not to speak of Camus's own experience of exile during the war while writing the novel).[272] However, it is Rambert's choice in favour of solidarity over his own happiness that emblematises the victory of human spirit of revolt against the segregation and repression of the pandemic regime (i.e. the plague itself and the administrative reaction to it – both also meant as an allegory of France's occupation by the Nazis and the existence of concentration camps). Camus writes that when it comes to plagues, "everybody is a humanist" (*P* 34), in the face of its utter meaninglessness. It is the anonymity of death during a plague, the sheer arbitrariness in which it claims the lives of 'random' individuals (including the most 'innocent' ones), the de-individualisation of bodies buried in mass graves (or, as seen during COVID-19, stored in refrigeration lorries) that makes an epidemic so 'absurd' and which calls for solidarity and revolt (both in a metaphysical and political sense). It is the 'banality of evil' (of the plague, but also of the other virus that Camus allegorises in the novel, namely (Nazi) fascism, fanatical nihilism and political or religious absolutism of any sort) that is most terrifying and dehumanising. It is that which calls for resistance in the knowledge that like illness and death (and the 'rats' carrying the pestilence bacillus) cannot ultimately be defeated (just like Camus's life-long struggle with tuberculosis). Since there is no salvation outside of this world it is *this* one life that counts and that needs affirmation. It is an affirmation, however, that ultimately is without hope in that it will inevitably end in death and defeat. And it is a struggle that must be based on the recognition that an individual pursuit of happiness can only function through solidarity with others. "For human truth lies in accepting death without hope. Real courage means never to cheat. That double lesson is at the core of Camus's major novel, *The Plague*".[273] The fight against suffering and the pursuit of immanent happiness is all the more important, even while being endless, since the 'microbe' (the bacillus of the plague, the virus) is constantly present *in* and *with* 'us' and so is the beauty of this world. It is a question of "common decency [*honnêteté*]", as Tarrou explains (P, 136).[274]

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[266] Camus, "Letters to a German Friend", *Resistance, Rebellion, Death*, ed. and trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: The Modern Library, 1974), p. 28; quoted in Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe*, p. 48.

[267] Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe*, p. 49.

[268] *Ibid*., p. 58.

[269] Camus, "L'Envers et l'endroit [The Wrong Side and the Right Side]", in: *Oeuvres complètes d'Albert Camus* (Paris: Éd. Du Club de l'Honnête Homme, 1983), p. 155. I care about the world in everything I do, I care about humans with all my compassion and gratitude. Between these two sides of the world I do not want to choose, I do not like that one chooses (my translation).

[270] Cf. Margaret E. Gray, "Layers of Meaning in *La Peste*", in: Edward J. Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 165-177, for an excellent first overview.

[271] *Ibid*., p. 165.

[272] The 'tragic' dynamic in Camus's work and his humanism is generally attributed or at least linked to Camus's experience of exile as French-Algerian during Algeria's occupation and its subsequent

Arguably, the central scene of *La Peste* is the dialogue between Tarrou and Rieux, two friends united in their revolt against suffering, which contains all the central elements, values, moves, maybe also 'reflexes' of a tragic and liberal humanism as the only credible answer to the absurdity of the human condition and the inhuman beauty of life. One could argue that Tarrou

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movement towards independence. Cf. for example Lawrence D. Kritzman, "Camus's Curious Humanism or the Intellectual in Exile", *Modern Language Notes* 112.4 (1997): 550-575; Tony Judt, "The Reluctant Moralist: Albert Camus and the Discomfort of Ambivalence", *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 87-135; and Ronald D. Srigley, *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011).

[273] Victor Brombert, "Albert Camus, the Endless Defeat", *Raritan* 31.1 (2011): 30.

[274] This is also the starting point of what is called the 'new biology' which sees the role of viruses and microbes more generally as necessary and as pre-existential in evolutionary terms. For a more detailed analysis of the 'microbial turn' in biology and posthumanism see my "Microbes", in: Lynn Turner et al., eds., *Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 354-366 (an updated version is included in this volume as chapter 12). Ed Cohen's work, in particular, spells out the autoimmunitarian logic behind 'viral containment': "the reason we (i.e. humans) want to contain such diseases is precisely because we (i.e. living organisms) already contain them". Ed Cohen, "The Paradoxical Politics of Viral Containment; or, How Scale Undoes Us One and All", *Social Text* 29.1 (2011): 15. On the connection of 'zoonotic diseases' and the 'microbiome' in a posthumanist context see also Alan and Josephine Smart, *Posthumanism: Anthropological Insights* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2017), chapter 2 (pp. 17-42).

serves as a living example of conscious human sacrifice (as opposed to the unconscious, innocent death of the innocent child, judge Othon's son, which leads to a confrontation between Father Paneloux and the atheist, Doctor Rieux). Rieux is the helpless witness to Tarrou's losing battle against the microbe, but as the narrator, he is also its prime moral 'beneficiary', the survivor to tell the tale. Tarrou is motivated – like every *homme révolté* – by a hatred of violence even if committed in the name of apparently 'good causes':

> As time went on I merely learned that even those who were better than the rest could not keep themselves nowadays from killing or letting others kill, because such is the logic by which they live; and that we can't stir a finger in this world without the risk of bringing death to somebody. Yes, I've been ashamed ever since; I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace. And to-day I am still trying to find it; still trying to understand all those others and not to be the mortal enemy of anyone. I only know that one must do what one can to cease being plague-stricken, and that the only way in which we can hope for some peace or, failing that, a decent death. This, and only this, can bring relief to men and, if not save them, at least do them the least harm possible and even, sometimes, a little good. (*P*, 206-207)

It is the 'inner plague', the "plague within [man]" (*P*, 207), which is the reason that "[w]e must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him" (*P*, 207). "[T]he good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention" (*P*, 207), in this scheme. Tarrou's 'lesson' on the sacrificial logic of the (good, or at least less evil) human culminates in what is probably the best-known statement of the novel: "All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences [*fléaux*] and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join force with the pestilences" (*P*, 207).[275]

What Tarrou aspires to is to being a "saint without God" (*P*, 208) and to be even 'less ambitious' (in terms of heroic humanism) than Rieux, who still aspires to be 'human': "What interests me is – being human [*être un homme*]", Rieux says (P, 209; translation modified). This may, indeed, be the hardest lesson to be administered to humans, namely that their ultimate 'sin of pride' is to aspire to 'humanity', when all they need to do is to perform their "*métier d'homme*".[276] In this sense, Tarrou's death, the ultimate defeat for the medical doctor unable to help the friend he loves and admires, is tragically 'cathartic'. Tarrou's 'legacy' is for Rieux, the witness, to tell – a tale (or 'chronicle') that is not heroic in the sense of a song of praise of human *grandeur*, but maybe heroic in a more stoic sense, of an unwinnable fight against "the spear-thrusts of the plague" striking his friend's "human form (…) consumed by searing superhuman fires" (*P*, 235). And what, then, is the lesson of 'tragic humanism'?, one might ask. That "all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories" (*P*, 237). This is not quietism, however, "Tarrou, perhaps, would have called that winning the match" (*P*, 237).

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[275] Tarrou's statement inspired a number of post-Holocaust, post-totalitarian intellectuals and novelists, among them Elio Vittorini and his *Uomini e no* (1945) [translated as *Men and not men*] whose main message and sacrificial humanist logic states that the victim is always more human the perpetrator. Cf. Elio Vittorini, *Men and not men*, trans. Sarah Henry (Marlboro, Vt: The Marlboro Press, 1985). See chapter 7 in this volume.

[276] Camus, "Le Vent à Djemila", Noces, in *Oeuvres Complètes d'Albert Camus* (Paris: Éd. du Club de l'Honnête Homme, 1983), p. 170.

Rieux legitimates his role as narrator (he only reveals himself once the events of the plague in Oran have been resolved, so to speak) in order to create and maintain the idea of a 'chronicle' – i.e. an objective, self-less account of an almost 'cosmic' battle (between good and evil), expressed in the mystifying sentence:

> Summoned to give evidence regarding what was a sort of crime, he has exercised the restraint that behoves a conscientious witness. All the same, following the dictates of his heart, he has deliberately taken the victims' side and tried to share with his fellow-citizens the only certitudes they had in common – love, exile, and suffering. Thus he can truly say there was not one of their anxieties in which he did not share, no predicament of theirs that was not his. (*P*, 246)

In the (legal) case against the human brought on by the cosmic force of nature in the form of the microbe, "Dr Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favour of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise" (*P*, 246).

This cathartic and affirmative lesson – the degree zero of any humanism, namely that humans are and remain redeemable – remains a temporary achievement, however. It constitutes the radical 'openness' and ambivalence of the human animal (cf. Agamben); and it is, ultimately, what guarantees that the cosmic drama will continue. This is the knowledge and humility that the plague has administered to Camus's humanist:

> He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightenment of men, it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city. (*P*, 252)

It gives rise to the 'tragic nostalgia' and the insight that "through suffering comes knowledge".[277]

Yearning for the human in inhuman or posthuman times is a desire that drives any humanism. *Post*human suffering today involves a recognition that the tragic anthropocentrism of Camus cannot be ignored but also that the principle of solidarity that humanism proposes has proven insufficient. Camus was certainly deeply aware of the 'beauty' and 'inhumanity' of nature in his keenly felt, exilic attachment to the Algerian landscape of his youth. However, the realm of the 'nonhuman' (nature, the 'animal', the alien and absent god) remains 'other' in its indifference. And in its indifference or ambivalence it also remains a 'challenge' or a task. What separates a posthumanist understanding from existentialism, ultimately, is the awareness of the inextricable entanglement between humans and nonhumans (between nature and culture, between human and nonhuman animals, life and death, bodies and technics, etc.). It is this new 'non/human' condition and the new forms of solidarity it calls for, which does not so much invalidate the tragic humanist desire for meaning but extends it, or that calls for affirmation and non/human solidarities today. It is an extension of Camus's life affirmation 'beyond' the human, accommodating, living-with the nonhuman, including the 'virus' and an extension of solidarity to nonhumans. The posthuman communities of ecological entanglement should see Camus's ethical and political struggle for happiness and social justice in the face of 'absurdity' despite all its shortcomings and weaknesses not as irrelevant or opposed but as complementary to the search for new ecological forms of 'multi-species' justice. After all, to transform nihilism from passive despair into a way of revolting against the death drive at work in the Anthropocene is still very much at the heart of contemporary climate protest movements. However, there will not be much time left to regret the downfall of the tragic human and 'his' condition. He will need to be told to get a grip. While there is no harm in believing that there is (still) more things to admire than to despise in humans (or nature for that matter) the human can no longer remain a semi-detached 'stranger' to this world. Tragedy's catharsis and the cultivation of 'moral excellence', today, lie outside anthropocentrism.

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[277] Cf. Robert Zaretsky, "The Tragic Nostalgia of Albert Camus", *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 39.3 (2013): 67.

Section II – Animal Writing

6 Solidarity with the Non/Human

We have to start from where *we* are.[278]

Normally, when we speak of solidarity, we mean ‘human solidarity’ or ‘solidarity between humans”’, ideally all humans, rich and poor, black and white, male and female, or anything in between or intersecting these, in short, despite all (human) differences. There is no doubt that this kind of solidarity is absolutely desirable and crucial, especially in critical times like ours, when the gap between rich and poor humans is widening, racism and sexism persist and new threats like human-induced climate change, biotechnology and genetic engineering are putting the survival of an increasing number of species, including the human, into question. It is hard to see how the kind of solidarity called for under these circumstances could not, as Richard Rorty wrote, rely on the idea that “there is something within each of us – our essential humanity – which resonates to the presence of this same thing [i.e. human solidarity] in other human beings”.[279]

Rorty’s aim was to get rid of this (human or humanist) essentialism without jettisoning the principle of solidarity. As a liberal pragmatist, he insisted on the contingency of human identity and rejected the need for notions like ‘essence’, ‘nature’ or ‘foundation’. However, if “what counts as being a decent human being is relative to historical circumstance, a matter of transient consensus about what attitudes are normal and what practices are just or unjust (…) [w]hat can there be except human solidarity, our recognition of one another’s common humanity?”[280] In other words, how can there be solidarity without a rather abstract and remote notion of ‘our common humanity’ – which has never stopped ‘us’ from insisting on the finer differences, the more or less humanness of ‘others’, women, blacks, indigenous, trans … ‘people’. Yet it is arguably not so much that a sense of humanity cannot be achieved, it is rather that it just cannot be based on any essential commonality. It can only be achieved ‘pragmatically’ and ‘locally’, Rorty would argue: “our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as ‘one of us’, where ‘us’ means something smaller and more local than the human race”.[281] Does this not sanction the worst sort of parochialism, a defence of the status quo, and any form of ‘ethnocentrism’, one might ask? Not necessarily. This pragmatic shift does not do away with the desire and the necessity of solidarity, it only displaces it from an absolute and abstract moral obligation into the terrain of pragmatic politics and confronts it with its own historical contingency, i.e. its embeddedness in the vocabularies and traditions of “the secularized democratic societies of the West”.[282] Rorty’s main pragmatic claim regarding solidarity is that it is “made rather than found, produced in the course of history rather than recognized as an ahistorical fact”.[283] This is an important insight, especially at a time when universalising concepts like the

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[278] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 198.

[279] *Ibid*., p. 189.

[280] *Ibid*.

[281] *Ibid*., p. 191.

[282] *Ibid*., p. 192.

[283] *Ibid*., p. 195.

'Anthropocene' again threaten to erase historical, economic and social differences like unevenly distributed rights, responsibilities and benefits and sufferings. As far as the threat of extinction at the level of species is concerned, we are, it is claimed, all concerned equally. This is where a call for human solidarity begins to sound and feel like a cynical denial of historical and political contingency and difference.[284]

Solidarity when facing such a common threat that nevertheless calls for differentiation as to cause and effect – who is responsible and who is most concerned? – can only be achieved without a pre-existing notion of 'truth', 'reason' or 'nature'. It can only be achieved through (re)negotiation not by 'recognising' something that supposedly 'pre-exists' in the form of an 'essence' (like 'human nature', for example). It cannot take the form of a 'neutral' and timeless (moral) obligation. Hence Rorty's standpoint:

> I want to distinguish human solidarity as the identification with 'humanity as such' and as the self-doubt which has gradually, over the last few centuries, been inculcated into inhabitants of the democratic states – doubt about their own sensitivity to the pain and humiliation of others, doubt that the present institutional arrangements are adequate to deal with this pain and humiliation, curiosity about possible alternatives.[285]

So let us take Rorty at his word, especially since he proposes what one might call a (proto)posthumanist move as far as the extension of solidarity is concerned, when he writes that a pragmatic notion of solidarity not relying on universalist, foundational and essentialist ideas "is incompatible with the idea that there is a 'natural' cut in the spectrum of similarities and differences which spans the difference between you and a dog, or you and one of Asimov's robots – a cut which marks the end of the rational beings and the beginning of the nonrational ones, the end of moral obligation and the beginning of benevolence".[286] This is strikingly similar to what Donna Haraway proposed in her "Manifesto for Cyborgs" in 1985[287] – certainly one of the foundational texts of critical posthumanism (CPH). In a sense, Rorty here even anticipates Haraway's own subsequent move towards (or at least shift of emphasis on) companion species more generally.[288]

If solidarity should not or cannot presuppose a shared 'human nature' on which a universally distributed 'rational being' can rely to found a moral obligation towards others then new forms of inclusion (and exclusion as well, of course) not only become visible but even necessary as the remit of moral obligation changes and widens. This is, in my view, the context in which Timothy Morton's *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (2017) should be placed. Morton starts by (re)thinking a (communist) politics for our time as planetary (and not just international) in scope, a planetary politics attuned to the fact of "living in a biosphere" – which he calls "the symbiotic real".[289] This planetary biosphere constitutes the phenomenology of shared biological and evolutionary co-existence – without any doubt an openly 'biocentric' approach threatening to exclude "Asimov's robots", as Rorty would put it. "The right word to describe this reliance between discrete yet deeply interrelated beings", Morton writes, is "solidarity", without which, "the tattered incompletion of the symbiotic real at every scale (…) [it, i.e. solidarity] would have no meaning". Solidarity only works, he claims, "when it is thought at this scale".[290] It is the precondition for what he calls "humankind" (as opposed to humanity, playing on the generic meaning as well as on its "kindness") understood as general ecological awareness.

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[284] Cf. Rosi Braidotti's analysis of the COVID-19 epidemic and the political issues of human and nonhuman solidarity it raises, in "'We' Are In This Together, But We Are Not One and the Same", *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 17 (2020): 465-469.

[285] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 198.

[286] *Ibid*., p. 192.

[287] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-182.

[288] Cf. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Others* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.) It is worth reminding that Haraway has always dissociated herself from the label 'posthumanism', stressing instead her preference for the solidarity of a "becoming with" (cf. e.g. *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 17) and the desirability of "multispecies justice" (*Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 3).

The kind of solidarity (with nonhuman people) Morton has in mind starts with acknowledging and overcoming what he calls the "Severing": in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, "a traumatic fissure between (…) *reality* (the human correlated world) and the *real* (ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts of the biosphere)",[291] a foreclosure that has been (re)occurring since the Neolithic when humans turned to agriculture and settlement. To work through this foreclosure one has to recognise that solidarity is in fact the "default affective environment of the top layers of Earth's crust", or "the noise made by the symbiotic real as such". [292] Without that basic and ubiquitous, let us say 'deep ontological' level of solidarity, Morton wonders:

> how can humans achieve solidarity even among themselves if massive parts of their social, psychic and philosophical space have been cordoned off? (…) Difficulties of solidarity between humans are therefore also artifacts of repressing and suppressing possibilities of solidarity with nonhumans".[293]

As a result, to commit to solidarity today is "to feel haunted" by the suppression of our primordial solidarity with nonhumans.[294] Letting go of human anthropocentrism leads one to recognise that human life is much "less spectacular, less grandiose, less vital (…) more ambiguous, more disturbing and more encompassing".[295] Human life, life in general, cannot, in fact, be contained within species boundaries, but rather is porous and always manifests itself as an assemblage of symbionts. What the discussion around the 'Anthropocene' shows, in Morton's view, is that "the imperial anthropocentric project – a project with human as well as nonhuman victims – is over, because we can't think it anymore with a straight face".[296] Hence Morton's appeal to kindness, since "being kind means being-in-solidarity with nonhumans: with *kind-red*";[297] it means including nonhumans as our 'neighbours'. In this way, it is not merely possible to achieve solidarity with nonhumans, it rather means that "solidarity implies (…) and *requires* nonhumans (…). [In fact] solidarity just is solidarity with nonhumans",[298] or, to use Jacques Derrida's phrase, a "solidarity of the living".[299]

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[289] Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 1.
[290] *Ibid*., p. 2.
[291] *Ibid*., p. 1.
[292] *Ibid*., p. 14.
[293] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[294] *Ibid*., p. 84.
[295] *Ibid*., p. 44.
[296] *Ibid*., p. 122.

To return to the pragmatic value of Morton's extension and radicalisation of the concept of solidarity: it becomes clear that if one were to reread Rorty through a critical posthumanist or postanthropocentric lens à la Morton the opposition between "the desire for solidarity" and the "desire for objectivity" Rorty sets up[300] shapes up somewhat differently. The liberal pragmatic desire for a truth that is 'good for us', given "our posthuman condition" between the fourth industrial revolution and the sixth mass extinction,[301] is no longer separable from a desire for a 'realist objectivity' in the form of what Morton calls the more-than-human 'real' of deep ontological solidarity. The search for truth in the Anthropocene cannot be confined to human (and even less, humanist) communities but has to include from the start the nonhuman, the environment and the planet. What is 'good for us to believe' is the object of a transformative posthumanist, postanthropocentric ecopolitics that takes Rorty at his word when he says: "For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can".[302] This also means *overcoming* some differences, namely the ones humanist anthropocentrism relies on and on which human exceptionalism is based, while *embracing* others, for example the fact that not all humans live (or even want to) in liberal pluralist societies. This includes the question of what 'we' (i.e. the Rortyan 'we' of white, Western, cosmopolitan, etc. liberals) should do with that realisation, and what it means for the defence and future of the 'Western' model of liberal democracy, which, it seems, is increasingly under threat both from 'within' and from 'without' and thus needs to be defended from both sides, at the same time. However, minimising anthropogenic climate change and avoiding extinction should be a good enough ecopolitical goal to construct new forms of solidarity around to begin with – without, hopefully, having to go through a new round of global wars over dwindling 'resources', now that 'we' know that what used to be called by this name (i.e. resource) increasingly has to become part of the 'us' of solidarity and will have to be attributed a subjectivity and an agency of its own.

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[297] *Ibid*., p. 138.

[298] *Ibid*., p. 189.

[299] Jacques Derrida, *La Solidarité des vivants et le pardon – Conférence et entretiens*, ed. Evando Nascimanto (Paris: Hermann, 2016), pp. 125-126.

[300] Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?", in Michael Krausz, ed., *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 167-183.

[301] Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), p. 2.

[302] Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity", p. 169.

7 *Uomini e no*: Elio Vittorini's Dogs and Sacrificial Humanism

Human

> [Le bourreau] peut tuer un homme, mais il ne peut pas le changer en autre chose.[303]
>
> But perhaps not every man is a man; and not all humanity is humanity (…). One persecutes and another is persecuted. You can kill a man and he will be all the more a man [*más hombre*]. And so a sick man, a starving man, is all the more a man; and humanity dying of hunger is humanity all the more.[304]

The most intriguing aspect of Vittorini's novel *Uomini e no*, in my view, is what seems an almost self-evident but, upon closer inspection, rather puzzling assumption this novel sets out to prove, namely that the victim, or the abused, is always more human than the perpetrator, or the abuser. This fundamentally Christian conviction – connected to a New Testament humanism of turning the other cheek, Jesus's identification with the 'lamb' facing the 'wolves', his promise of salvation for the weak – understands the sacrifices made and the suffering endured *by* but also *for* the other human as the ultimate sign of humility and humanity. It is a powerful and *sympathetic* stance that one might refer to as 'sacrificial humanism'.

This essay investigates the dialectic of de- and rehumanisation in Vittorini, and with him, a whole generation of writers and thinkers, for whom this dialectic is an integral element of a humanist world view. To declare my interest straight away, my own stance is that of a critical (i.e. 'deconstructive') *post*humanism (CPH) aimed at working through 'our' (European) humanist legacy, which continues to haunt 'us' with the 'best' and 'worst' humans are capable of. This haunting is also part of what Rosario Forlenza describes as the "sacrificial memory" and "political legacy" in postwar Italy (and undoubtedly elsewhere).[305] Vittorini's moment, the context in which he wrote *Uomini e no*, is described by Forlenza as a "brutal civil war":

> The dissolution of the social and institutional order brought about an unprecedented degree of existential uncertainty, turning the life of civilians into a front-line experience, destroying patterns of trust and social consensus and undermining faith in elites and political authority. The war had been experienced in very different ways by the various sectors of the population: soldiers, anti-fascist partisans, apolitical citizens, members of the Fascist Party, supporters of the Nazi collaborationist government, expellees from Istria – to name just a few. The role of Italy in the war was unclear, or at least complicated: the country was simultaneously loser, occupied, resister, victor.[306]

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[303] Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine* [1947] (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 241 ([The executioner] can kill a man, but he cannot change him into something else). My translation.

[304] Elio Vittorini, *Conversations in Sicily: A Novel*, trans. Alane Salierno Mason (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2003), pp. 110-11.

[305] Rosario Forlenza, "Sacrificial Memory and Political Legitimacy in Postwar Italy", *History and Memory* 24.2 (2012): 73-116.

[306] *Ibid*., pp. 73-74.

The period of 1943 to 1945, during which Vittorini came to join the resistance and write down his experience in fictionalised form in *Uomini e no*, according to Forlenza, should be “interpreted as one in which three wars were fought simultaneously: a patriotic war, a class war and a civil war”.[307] *Uomini e no* – even though not mentioned explicitly by Forlanza[308] – is one of many testimonials in which “victimization, suffering and sacrifice” constitute “the most significant memories and symbols”, while “the language of mourning provided the clearest expression of the desire for a meaningful existence”.[309] Vittorini’s novel perfectly illustrates this working-through process of extraordinary sacrifice, violence and trauma and the associated search for new solidarity, equality and community. It also intervenes within a dispute that has been raging ever since the human (and human*ist*) catastrophe of the Holocaust, namely about what the appropriate reaction to unspeakable atrocities inflicted by human beings on fellow human beings might be. Do human catastrophe, dehumanisation and victimisation call for a reinforcement or renewal of humanism in the form of an existentialist revolt à la Sartre or Camus, *malgré tout*? Or is humanism with its foundation on anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism condemned to repeat the very exclusions and dehumanisations it has always set out to combat and overcome? In other words, do we need more humanism or less? Is humanism the solution or part of the problem? These are questions that are at the heart of the philosophical discussion on posthumanism and the posthuman, as new challenges of a technological and environmental nature increasingly render the traditional (humanist) delimitation of what constitutes human ‘nature’ problematic. *Uomini e no*, with its sacrificial logic, as I will argue, goes to the heart of the matter in this respect.

While the central questions of the novel about what constitutes humanity and human(e)ness in the face of ‘bestiality’ and how to deal with violence (or, the question of activism that preoccupies the main protagonist, Enne 2, an intellectual turned resistance leader) arise out of the Nazi brutality against ordinary people, the status of the victim, especially in (post)Holocaust literature, has continued to haunt humanism more generally. Although Vittorini does not write about the Holocaust *per se*, his *Uomini e no* nevertheless has to be read as a part of ‘testimonial’ WWII literature by a community of left-wing international writers trying to come to terms with the human catastrophe the World Wars and genocide represent. Robert Antelme’s *L’espèce humaine* (1957) as well as Primo Levi’s *Se questo e un uomo* (1947) are other well-known examples in this respect. How to come to terms with surviving the ‘worst’: human inhumanity? How to deal with the cracks appearing within humanism’s idea of human perfectibility and optimism? How to remain human in the face of human abjection?[310]

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[307] *Ibid*., p. 74.

[308] Forlanza instead mentions poetry by Quasimodo and Ungaretti and explains that “references to sacrifice, martyrdom and suffering pervaded other works in the postwar period, from Edoardo De Filippo’s theatre play *Napoli Gets Rich!* (1945) to Elsa Morante’s *History: A Novel* (1975), and from Roberto Rossellini’s movie *Rome Open City* (1945) to Alberto Moravia’s best-selling novel *La ciociara* (1957)” (Forlanza, p. 80).

[309] Forlanza, p. 78.

[310] Post-WWII philosophy is of course also engaged in this grieving process, from Adorno to Lyotard and beyond.

As Martin Crowley explains, however, the notion of survival after the 'end' of humanity is itself divided: "On the one hand, we remain attached to a model of survival as heroic feat; on the other, we have also begun to conceive of survival as the fragile persistence of the surpassingly weak".[311] This division is what troubles Enne 2 in his swaying between a final act of heroism (to kill the personification of evil, *Cane Nero*) and a fatalistic *perdersi*, or in other words, his dilemma between fighting for survival or joining the (always more human) victims and seeking refuge in the idea that Albert Camus' Tarou so famously expressed, namely that what should be avoided at all cost is to be part of the *fléau* (the scourge, or the perpetrators).[312] How can humanity remain indivisible, how to preserve a humanism at least partially (if that is possible), based on essentialist and universalist values, in the face of the obvious rift between perpetrators and victims?

It is Crowley's main claim that Antelme's notion of a "residual humanity" manages to preserve "some configuration of human commonality". In doing so: "Antelme's humanity (…) exceeds its postwar moment by anticipating the commitment to exposure, finitude and vulnerability which marks contemporary efforts to think beyond the opposition of humanism and anti-humanism, while also retaining a kind of ontological 'bite' which helps it maintain a resisting specificity in relation to this contemporary move".[313] Antelme's strategy is that of insisting on an unbreakable unity of humanity grounded in a "biology beyond qualification" understood as a "kind of fragile solitude".[314] It is a humanity based on the indivisibility and frailty of the human species and its existential 'condition', or what Heidegger would call 'being-towards-death'.

The posthumanist critique of such a stance, however, would insist on the point that such a residual and indivisible humanity would always have to be safeguarded at the cost of human solidarity with nonhuman and animal others.[315] So, it seems that to safeguard the principle of humanity as indivisible and to include both the "violence of the executioner and the vulnerability of the victim", and thus to accept that "brutality constitutes part of what it means to be human",[316] Antelme, Vittorini and the postwar (sacrificial) humanism their entire generation stands for are willing, ultimately, to *sacrifice* human responsibility towards the nonhuman other. For them, the inclusiveness of the human species *must* produce an exclusion or at least a subordination of solidarity with nonhuman others. One might spell out this desperate, one might even say tragic, belief in humanity like this: even if protecting the principle of humanity might involve a "dialectic without transcendence", even if the only remaining avenue of saving humanism and a notion of humanity might lead to admitting its ultimate inhumanity, this stubborn insistence on an almost 'spectral', irreducible humanity, which fully embraces the victim-perpetrator spectrum within humanity, would somehow still manage to salvage human 'dignity' in the face of human violence and vulnerability. In doing so, it would provide some ultimate reassurance arising from tragic despair and produce some fundamental-ontological human solidarity to be carried forward by the survivors.

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[311] Martin Crowley, *Robert Antelme: Humanity, Community, Testimony* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 1.

[312] "Je dis seulement qu'il y a sur cette terre des fléaux et des victims et qu'il faut, autant qu'il est possible, refuser d'être avec le fléau." Albert Camus, *La peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 274.

[313] Crowley, *Robert Antelme*, pp. 6-7.

[314] *Ibid*., pp. 7, 8.

[315] See Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017) and the further discussion below.

[316] Crowley, *Robert Antelme*, pp. 9, 11.

Antelme and Vittorini became good friends after the war,[317] and as Crowley writes, the affirmation of a common humanity, despite everything, in Antelme's view, was first formulated by Vittorini in his *Uomini e no*.[318] In France, as Virna Brigatti reminds us in her *Diacronia* of *Uomini e no*,[319] Vittorini was perceived as "l'un des chefs de file de l'antifascisme culturel", while *Uomini e no* (translated as *Les hommes et les autres*, in 1947)[320] was hailed as a "roman de la Résistance", as a "livre de l'engagement" and, most importantly, "une des oeuvres les plus importantes de l'humanisme révolutionnaire contemporaine".[321] In Italy, Vittorini's influence and image was of course more nuanced and complex. Guido Bonsaver's study of Vittorini's life and work, the most recent and comprehensive study of its kind in English, begins with the following assessment:

> Elio Vittorini was undoubtedly a central figure in Italy's cultural arena from the 1930s to the mid-1960s. During the years of the fascist regime, his shift from enthusiastic support for Mussolini's fascist 'revolution', to disillusionment as a result of the Spanish Civil War and finally to active anti-fascism during the war years, is symbolic of – and to some degree influenced – the choices of an entire generation of young intellectuals.[322]

While Vittorini is probably best remembered for his novel *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1941) it was *Uomini e no* which, written during 1944 and published in June 1945, provided Italians with the first fictional account of the partisan war, and "caused him to be hailed as one of the 'fathers' of neorealism".[323] Vittorini's life-long political *impegno* is underpinned by the principle of a "return to the human", as Cesare Pavese put it.[324] The search for a new humanism thus forms a continuity in Vittorini's work and spiritual development.[325] The encounter with the new human both at a social and a stylistic level is the main objective of Vittorini's work which aims to overcome human solitude in the solidarity of a new 'myth' of the human, a task, according to Pavese, that Vittorini understands as "discovering and celebrating the human beyond the solitude caused by pride and intellect".[326]

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[317] See Guido Bonsaver, *Elio Vittorini: The Writer and the Written* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2000), p. 124.

[318] Cf. Crowley, *Robert Antelme*, pp. 12, and 26, note 8. Colin Davis groups Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine* under what he calls a "conventional mid-century Marxist humanism" and places it alongside Marguerite Duras's *La Douleur* (1985) in which she "develops a possibility inherent in Antelme's position, but one which remains in the background of *L'Espèce humaine*: the unity of the human species has the consequence that SS and prisoners, torturers and victims, perpetrators and bystanders are disturbingly indistinguishable in nature" (see Davis, "Antelme and the Ethics of Writing", *Comparative Literature Studies* 34.2 (1997): 177; see also Bruno Chouat's critique of Davis in Chouat, "'La mort ne recèle pas tant de mystère': Robert Antelme's Defaced Humanism", *L'Esprit créateur* 40.1 (2000): 88-99; as well as Erin Tremblay Ponnou-Delaffon, " 'Ni haine ni pardon': Gabriel Marcel and Robert Antelme on the Limits of the Human", *French Forum* 40.2-3 (2015): 33-46).

[319] Virna Brigatti, *Diacronia di un romanzo:* Uomini e no *de Elio Vittorini (1944-1966)* (Milano: Ledizioni, 2016).

[320] Vittorini was unhappy with the French translation of the title, which he described as a "titre erroné" because it implies precisely the opposite of what Vittorini (and Antelme) held to be their most important insight: the indivisibility of humanity as a principle: "*Uomini e no*, le titre italien de ce roman, signifie exactement que nous, les hommes, pouvons aussi être des 'non hommes'. C'est-à-dire, ce titre vise à rappeler qu'il y a, en l'homme, de nombreuses possibilités inhumaines. Mais il ne divise pas l'humanité en deux parties: dont l'une serait tout humaine et l'autre tout inhumaine" (see Elio Vittorini, *Les hommes et les autres*, trans. Michel Arnaud, Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 8.). For the full quotation and its Italian original see Bonsaver, p. 113.

[321] Brigatti, pp. 373-374, who is here referring to and quoting from Olivier Forlin, *Les intellectuels français et l'Italie (1945-1955), Médiation culturelle, engagements et représentations* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006).

[322] Bonsaver, p. 1.

The main stylistic inspiration for the generation of neorealists (and Pavese and Vittorini, in particular) came from contemporary US-American literature (esp. Hemingway, Faulkner and Saroyan whom Vittorini translated) and the social myth of the American way of life as unhampered by the weight of "European history".[327] The utopian project Vittorini pursued in his life and work was the humanist moral and social transformation of the *mondo offeso*, the experience of human suffering and class struggle with an aim to overcome human solitude in a more solidary community, all captured in the injunction of the phrase "*essere più uomo*": "This concept of the community of experience is the connecting link, a tenuous and not very satisfactory one between Vittorini's aesthetics and politics", according to Donald Heiney.[328] Vittorini's search for a new style of a "*linguaccio profetico*" is closely related to his new humanist dream of a sublimated social reality, which, at the same time, he understands as a return to 'humanity', as he professes in his programmatic preface to *Il garofano rosso* (1933-1934).[329] As an intellectual and writer Vittorini's *impegno* and his engagement in the resistance movement cohere in the idea of a *letteratura impegnata* and in the role of the intellectual as a custodian of (humanist) culture, as exemplified in Vittorini's editing career as well as his cultural and political journalism in influential journals like *Solaria*, *Il Bargello*, *L'Unità* right up to *Il Politecnico*. As "*organizzatore culturale*" he advocated a politicisation of culture that was ideologically underpinned by a combination of 'social' communism and humanist morality:

> His ideology of intellectual identity consists of a set of concentric rings. On the outside, at the most superficial level, he is a revolutionist and therefore a Marxist. At the next level down he is an artist interested in the commonality, the universality, of sensory experience. At a still deeper level is the most fundamental of his identities: the

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[323] Bonsaver, p. 104. On the somewhat problematic subsumption of Vittorini and *Uomini e no* under the label of 'neorealism' see Anthony Cinquemani, "Vittorini's *Uomini e no* and Neorealism", *Forum Italicum* 17.2 (1983): 152-163.

[324] Cesare Pavese, "Ritorno all'uomo", *L'Unità* (20 May 1945), reissued in 2010 by Pistoia: Petite plaisance, available online at: http://www.petiteplaisance.it/ebooks/1101-1120/1119/el_1119.pdf.

[325] This is also Italo Calvino's assessment in "Vittorini: progettazione e letteratura", in Calvino, *Una pietra sopra: Discorsi de letteratura e società* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), pp. 159-160.

[326] Pavese, p. 2.

[327] Cf. for example Vittorini, *Diario in pubblico* [1957] (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), pp. 84-85.

[328] Donald Heiney, *Three Italian Novelists: Moravia, Pavese, Vittorini* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 152.

[329] Elio Vittorini, *Il garofano rosso* (first published in *Solaria* in 1933-1934; including the preface to the first edition) (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), pp. 202-207.

> warmness and empathy that gropes for warmness and empathy in others (…). This is the true sense in which Vittorini is a 'collectivist'.[330]

The question that, for Heiney, arises from this collectivism directly informs *Uomini e no*, without, however, really receiving a satisfactory answer to the question of "how does the individual fit in this collective urge, what happens to the ego, to identity, in the surrender of personality to a common effort?".[331] In other words, how to combine the autobiographical and the political in a struggle for more humanity to achieve the ideal of a "*più uomo*" or "*más hombre*"[332] that preoccupies the intellectual turned resistance fighter, Enne 2.

In *Uomini e no* Vittorini uses a number of innovative structural and stylistic means to insist on the denunciation of evil and the *offesa* which leads him to experiment with a rapprochement between author, character and reader and to a foregrounding of his motivation of writing. The novel mixes historical, mythical and autobiographical elements (the resistance in Milan, an idealized Sicilian childhood, an unhappy romantic relationship with a married woman). The editorial history of the novel is complex and reveals Vittorini's dissatisfaction with his work even though it being a financial success. The first and second edition contained 143 short chapters, while the third edition was shortened to 117. In the definitive edition of 1965 the novel ended up with 136 chapters. The text is formally divided into two parts. 23 (originally 29) chapters are in italics and form 6 groups interrupting the account of the action set in 1944 Milan. They are dealing with 'private' revelations and reflections of a barely hidden autobiographical nature. As Bolsaver explains, the plot works on two different levels:

> The first, relates in third person the events involving the protagonist, the partisan Enne 2. Interwoven with these chapters are a series of sections in italics where the narrator's voice comes to the fore, sometimes to surreal effect – as when we are presented with a conversation between narrator and protagonist – but more often in order to discuss various issues raised by the first level narration. The narrator's reflections about the nature of his writing constitute the new and most important ingredient in the novel.[333]

The novel thus contains elements of a historical narrative, reflections on the resistance and activism, as well as autobiographical-lyrical comments on the protagonist by a narrator who shows the complexity of Enne 2's motivations and his struggle between the engagement in violent action and the longing for "*semplicità*", the simple life of his rural childhood, as well as the resulting temptation of his suicidal "*perdersi*". The story of Enne 2 should thus be read from at least two angles: "it is the story of an intellectual who does not want to fight with weapons and does not want to kill, and it is the story of a man desperately in love with a married woman".[334] It is in the italicised chapters that the reader finds reflections of the narrator on the central philosophical question posed by the title, namely whether the dichotomy between "men" and "not men" (as the English translation goes)[335] can be upheld.

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[330] Heiney, p. 153.

[331] *Ibid*.

[332] For the influence of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and the Spanish civil war on Vittorini's ideas on the "man of action", see Heiney, p. 66.

[333] Bolsaver, p. 104.

[334] Bolsaver, p. 107.

[335] Elio Vittorini, *Men and not men*, trans. Sarah Henry (Marlboro: The Marlboro Press, 1985).

The often quite ambivalent reception of the novel by literary critics, especially as far as the consistency between its stylistic innovation and its cultural political message is concerned, is due to the fact that, according to Brigatti, "literary criticism has read the novel according to two principal interpretive dimensions: in privileging the love story it consequently considered the death of the protagonist as a suicide driven by his sentimental delusion; alternatively, by privileging its testimonial value of the resistance it included the novel under the label of neorealism and thus considered the death of the protagonist as a sacrifice within the fight against Nazi fascism".[336]

It is the presence of the narrator's voice and his discussions with some of the characters that constitutes, according to Bonsaver, one of "the most innovative features in *Uomini e no*" (especially if compared with *Coversazione in Sicilia*).[337] The other innovation, which will be discussed in more detail below, is "the presence of a surreal dialogue between two dogs".[338] In relation to the latter, while Bonsaver sees such "experimentation" as "not particularly convincing since it takes place in only one of the many episodes in which the dogs are present", I will be insisting on the importance of this scene, which is part of a subplot in which Figlio-di-Dio (one of the few characters that have more than a purely 'allegorical' function, despite his 'telling name') tries to convert a dog to humanism.[339]

Despite all the stylistic and ideological criticisms levelled at Vittorini's *Uomini e no* from various quarters it is fair to say that the novel also contains a number of eminently redeeming qualities. One is certainly its tone which exercises restraint and resists "rhetorical excess", "glorification of the partisans' actions", "over-simplification" and "scathing demonization of the Nazi and fascist troops".[340] Despite, or in fact, because of its humanist ethos it "reminds us that the capacity to do evil is inherent in all humankind" and that "fascism also grows out of our everyday relationship with other people", as Bonsaver concludes. While *Uomini e no* thus avoids the "Manichean trap, dividing humanity into good and evil people",[341] we might wonder, however, at what price the unity of humanity and the utopian, idealised classless solidarity in a reconciled "*nuovo mondo*" does come.

In terms of Vittorini's *umanesimo*, *Uomini e no*, as mentioned at the beginning, develops a central idea that already appears in *Conversazione in Sicilia*, in which three types of humans exist: the persecutors, the persecuted and those who resist. It is in a key passage in chapter 27 that the narrator voices Vittorini's central idea of the "*più uomo (más hombre)*", which claims that the (human) victim is always more human than the perpetrator (see the second epigraph, above). The real problem for this core statement of sacrificial humanism, however, arises out of the status of the third group – not the perpetrators or victims, but the resistance fighters in *Uomini e no*, and the partisan Enne 2 more specifically, who, as a result, is torn between violence and self-effacement. Even clearer than the dichotomy between persecutors and victims, between lesser and more human humans in *Conversazione*, *Uomini e no* investigates the question of evil without dehumanising either victim or oppressor. The central ethical statement of the narrator concerning the question of humanity in the face of the human capacity for evil occurs in chapter 104:

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[336] Brigatti, *Diacronia di un romanzo*, p. 12 (my translation).

[337] See Bonsaver, p. 111.

[338] *Ibid*.

[339] It is worth mentioning here that Valentino Orsini's filmic adaptation of the novel in 1980 for RAI omits this 'surreal' subplot entirely, probably because it would have seemed incompatible with a 'neorealist' stance.

[340] Bonsaver, p. 112.

[341] *Ibid*., p. 113.

> Man, one says. And we think of someone fallen, or lost, of someone who cries and who is hungry, of him who is cold, sick, persecuted, of him who is put to death. We think of the wrong he is made to endure, and of his dignity. And of all in him that is offended, of the capacity he has for happiness. That is man.[342]

What follows, however, is the insistence of the question of evil committed by humans, the existence and persistence of the inhuman, the crime: "The crime? It is committed against mankind, against the world. By whom? And the blood that is shed? The persecution? The oppression?" (*MNM* 157/*UN* 174). The dichotomy is here redoubled in that the crime (the "*offesa*") concerns "mankind", the very humanity of humans, as opposed to the human victims, in the sense of 'blame the sin, not the sinner', because:

> He who falls, rises also. Insulted, oppressed, a man can make arms of the very chains on his feet. This is because he wants freedom, not vindication. This is man. And the Gestapo too? Of course! Even the Gestapo, as we call it today, and whatever it has been called in the past. Even the Gestapo. Whatever it is in the way of insult and indignity that befalls the world, man fights it. Even if it be man. Today we have Hitler. And what is he? Is he not a man? We have his Germans, we have the Fascists. And what is all that? Can we claim it is something outside mankind? Can we say they do not belong to mankind? (*MNM* 157/*UN* 174)

Vittorini's dialectic aimed at overcoming the paradox of human evil, as well as avoiding the impasse of a tragic humanism *à la* Camus, for example, lies in the idea of the resistance fighter, who is to become a pure instrument of liberation. His aim is to bring about new hope for new humans reunited in Christian-communist solidarity, as the end of the novel seems to imply. Enne 2 impersonates the inner combat that leads to a progressive self-abandonment on the way towards "*resistere per resistere*". His final sacrificial, purifying, act of killing *Cane Nero* and (thus also the 'wolf' within) himself is a tortuous pseudo-Christian act of "*perdersi*" that is necessary for humanity to return to itself ("*trovarsi*"):

> Perhaps that was the crux of it. That one could resist as if one had to resist forever, and as if there could never be anything besides resisting. Resist for as long as men might go down, for as long as they saw themselves going down, always being incapable of saving them, unable to help them, unable to do anything except fight or wish oneself lost and done for. And why fight? In order to resist. As if the doom that lay upon men could never end, and a liberation never come. Now to resist could be simple. Resist? Resist for the sake of resistance. It was very simple. (*MNM* 171/*UN* 190; chapter 114)

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[342] *Men and Not Men*, p. 156-157 (The original Italian is in Vittorini, *Uomini e no*, Classici moderni (Milan: Mondadori, 1965), p. 174). References to the English translation and this Italian edition will both subsequently be given in the text as *MNM* and *UN* respectively.

What Enne 2's yearning for *semplicità* amounts to, however, paradoxically, is nothing but a letting go of his 'humanity' one might argue: his love for Berta, his concern for the victims of the Piazza, his dead comrades, even the prospect of liberation, everything has to be jettisoned before he can become a pure instrument of resistance, outside any morality. This turns out to be the 'necessary evil' to kill all evil, to destroy *Cane Nero* and justify the kind of total *impegno* able to overcome "*lo Spettro*" (Berta's dress that Franco Fortini sees as the personified "*storico*" who speaks as "I" in the italicised sections).[343] Fortini, instead, sees Enne 2's death as the ultimate failure of his reconciling the "contrasto tra il pessimismo cristiano che vede il lupo nel cuore dell'uomo, e l'ottimismo della lotta che spera vedere vittoria".[344]

It is worth remembering here that Vittorini's humanism is part of an intricate system that seeks to regulate dehumanisation and rehumanisation in both victims and perpetrators. The victims are more human since their 'bestialisation' at the hands of the perpetrators' violence fails to take away their humanity. However, at the same time, the bestiality of the perpetrators is also not enough to negate their humanity. The result is a regulative system that, as one might argue, ironically, results in a movement in which, as bestialisation increases, humanity is being consolidated. No wonder that Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* just like *Uomini e no* is transfixed by the ambiguity of scepticism and hope that might arise out of this paradox of "humanimality".[345] (Human) solidarity, it is hoped, will arise out of the failed attempt of the dehumanisation/bestialisation of the perpetrator. As Martin Crowley explains, the executioner has in fact no power over the 'project of dehumanisation'. Pushed to its extremes, "the attempt to impose divisions on the human species" will only ever manage to reaffirm the humanity the executioner sets out to deny his victims.[346]

This is where we, at last, are approaching the crux of sacrificial humanism, where the most 'naked', the most vulnerable, *homo sacer* and 'his' bare life, to use Agamben's terminology,[347] is invoked to bring about a new human solidarity in absolute divestment, founded on an irrepressible but ultimately ungraspable human core. It is also precisely here that something very strange happens in and to Vittorini's *Uomini e no*, something within the logic of sacrificial humanism that, involuntarily, opens up the question and possibility of a *post*humanist notion of solidarity (a solidarity with the non/human), as I would argue.[348]

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[343] Franco Fortini, *Saggi Italiani* (Bari: DeDonato, 1974), p. 252.

[344] Fortini, p. 252. Translated in Shirley W. Vinall as "Christian pessimism which sees the wolf in the human heart, and the optimism of the struggle which hopes to see victory" (cf. Vinall, "The Portrayal of Germans in Vittorini's *Uomini e no*", *Journal of European Studies* 16 (1986): p. 214).

[345] See Peter Arnds, "Bodies in Movement: On Humanimality in Narratives about the Third Reich", in: Karin Sellber, Lena Wanggren and Kamillea Aghtan, eds., *Corporeality and Culture: Bodies in Movement* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 141-152.

[346] Cf. Martin Crowley, *L'homme sans: Politiques de la finitude* (Paris: Lignées, 2009), p. 75. While Crowley here paraphrases Antelme he also refers, in footnote 2, to Elio Vittorini, "ami intime d'Antelme", and his famous "*più uomo*", in *Conversazione in Sicilia*.

[347] Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[348] Maybe a kind of "solidarity with nonhuman people" Timothy Morton also advocates in his *Humankind* (further discussed below).

Animal

> It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions (…). The core of European thought? Yes, there is one sentence, a short simple sentence, only a few words, summing up the history of our continent, our humanity, our biosphere, from Holocene to Holocaust: (…) "Exterminate all the brutes".[349] The idea of extermination lies no farther from the heart of humanism than Buchenwald lies from the Goethehaus in Weimar.[350]
>
> [T]he animal is a paradigm of the victim.[351]

It is the logical conclusion of sacrificial humanism that the animal should be the victim *par excellence*.[352] The challenge, then for humanism becomes how to reintroduce a new and radical difference between the human and the animal, at this most compromising moment when animals might also become (ironically, perversely?) most 'human'. It is, in effect, the very bestialisation that produces the ultimate human 'remainder' on which a future solidarity of ('better') humans is to be built. This is where Vittorini's second major stylistic innovation Bonsaver referred to above comes in. Just this once in his work, Vittorini at a crucial moment in the narrative of *Uomini e no*, 'goes to the dogs', so to speak. In his search for *semplicità*, for the degree zero of humanity, Vittorini's narrator does in fact not focus on a human but on the dog Käptn Blut, who, as long as he is in the presence of his keeper, 'Son-of-God'/'Figlio-di-Dio', is "part of the human sphere" (*MNM*, 157/*UN* 175).

The build up to this passage comes after Giulaj, an innocent bystander at the Piazza massacre in which the Nazi soldiers execute innocent people including a little girl and a naked old man in reprisal of the assassination of a German officer by the resistance. Giulaj is torn to pieces by Captain Clemm's dogs – among them Käptn Blut – to avenge the killing of Greta (another dog) in self-defence (cf. chapter 85). Käptn Blut is taking part in Giulaj's 'execution' even though Son-of-God had previously pleaded with him and tried to 'persuade' him to leave Clemm's brutal services, and instead flee with him to become once more "man's friend". Son-of-God is a member of Enne 2's group of partisan fighters and works undercover as Captain Clemm's dog keeper. In his 'dialogue' with Blut, the dog 'agrees' to follow Son-of-God ("'Uh!' replied the dog" (124/140).[353] However, tragically, as one might say, Son-of-God is too late to pick up Blut, who's been (presumably) forcefully recruited to take part in Giulaj's killing. Blut 'wanted' to go away with Son-of-God but, now that it is too late, Blut has a bad conscience and is "huddled on the floor" (158/175), his averted eyes "evoking abandonment, perdition, darkness, whatever hell there is for dogs in which man has no place" (158/176): "Blut, the dog, knows that he cannot go away with Son-of-God after what he has done. He can no longer be a man's dog, a man's friend" (158/176).

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[349] These are Kurtz's words in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [1902] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 72.

[350] Sven Lindqvist, *"Exterminate all the Brutes": One man's odyssey into the heart of darkness and the origins of European genocide* [1992], trans. Joan Tate (New York: The New Press, 2014), pp. 13, 14, 18, 20.

[351] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 28.

[352] Cf. Crowley, *L'homme sans*, p. 135.

[353] The Christian symbolism demonstrates the extent to which Vittorini's sacrificial humanism is ultimately underwritten by spirituality and religion.

Earlier on, Captain Clemm had admitted to Son-of-God that he prefers his dogs to all the people he knows (124/140-141) because "Dogs don't betray you. They're always faithful" (124/140). Son-of-God questions whether faithfulness in this sense is, in fact, a 'virtue':

> "No, Captain. A man goes in a good direction, and his dog is faithful to him. A man goes in a bad one, and his dog is still faithful to him." (124/140)

Blut "may perhaps [have been] a good dog" (124/140)[354] and, as opposed to the third of Clemm's dogs, Gudrun, who in a dialogue amongst dogs (134-35/151) is characterised as evil and aggressive ("I want to eat you (…) *Ich will dich fressen*", 135/151), presumably because she's "in heat", should have made the right choice:

> "Do you like filth? You'd be better off with chicken thieves, Blut. You must change (…). Don't you smell that smell of theirs? (...) It's hyena (…). It's vulture. They are vultures. And that's how you will smell if you stay with them. Like Captain Clemm and like Black Dog. You want to smell like Black Dog? (...) What you are doing is wrong." (136/153)

Blut seems to have made up his mind, barks approving interjections and wants to follow him there and then. So Blut's exemplary 'tragedy' is that he is forced to become a perpetrator or a 'hyena' despite himself. Blut's regret (expressed in his "whining") prompts the narrator to ask whether the other (human) perpetrators would also "whine"?

> *Would they whine? However, the answer we are seeking lies elsewhere. Maybe they do whine. They are dogs. It is possible that they crawl under the bed and whine. But we want to know something else. Not whether the whining is human, or how it might be part of mankind. But if what they do, when they commit their crimes, is it part of mankind?* (159/176)

It is clear that Vittorini's dogs are anthropomorphic mirrors of the human plight of conscience. The question, however, is whether evil, crime, violence are 'part of mankind', whether they *compromise* humanity, as the narrator seems to imply, in what is a clear comparison between El Paso (a character who's plays a double game, a resistance fighter from the Spanish Civil War, a 'man of action', who has infiltrated the group of German SS and who plays a kind of jester role amongst them) and Enne 2, the dithering intellectual partisan in love:

> *Perhaps he [El Paso] would be capable of giving one of them to our dogs. Could he? Perhaps he could. We too can employ their weapons. But it wouldn't be simple, that is what I want to say. To fight what they are, without being what we are any longer? Without being part of mankind?* (161/179)

What draws these deliberations on the humanity of the 'man in action' to a conclusion is the narrator's eventual return to inclusiveness – almost in the sense of Terence's *Homo sum,*

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[354] Son-of-God suggests to Blut to 'convert' to become an 'honourable dog': "You couldn't earn your living decently? There's still time, Blut. Escape, head out into the open spaces. Go keep watch over some peasant's fields. Go guard a flock of sheep. Or go into the circus, and walk on a tightrope. Or live with some old blind person and be his guide" (53/61).

humani nihil a me alienum puto (I am human, nothing human is alien to me). Human, ultimately, is 'the human condition' – "all that is to be wept over", "God inside ourselves", the "titan within us" (162/180): "But man can also get along without anything inside him, neither want nor expectation, neither hunger nor cold; but that, we say, is not human" (162/180). And here, finally, the narrator asks the crucial question regarding the "*più uomo*" of the "offended" and the (human) status of the perpetrator:

> *We consider him. He is like unto a wolf. He attacks and ravages. And we say: This is no man. He acts in cold blood as does the wolf. But does this remove him from among mankind? We think only of the offended. No sooner is there offense than we side with the offended, and we say the offended are mankind (…). Behold mankind (…). And he who offends – what is he? We never think that he too is a man. Whatever else could he be? Wolf? (162/180)*

And as a kind of 'proof' of the inclusion of the perpetrators within humanity, all the while excluding their bestial deed, of course, the narrator adds:

> *I would like to see Fascism without man. What would it be? What could it do? Could it do anything at all if it were not in man's power to do that thing?* (162/180)

It is, in fact, the second time that the 'wolf' is making 'his' appearance in *Uomini e no* (Humans and wolves, one might also read the title of the novel, as a reflection on the Hobbesian *homo homini lupus*). The first time, the wolf is evoked by Enne 2's friend Gracco deliberating on the victims of the German reprisal for the attacks carried out by Enne 2's men. The victims are exhibited on the Piazza, some of whom are 'especially innocent', namely an old man and a little girl:

> The adversary could have chosen no better way to strike his target. In a little girl, in an old man, in two fifteen-year-old boys, in a woman, in another woman: that was the best way to strike a man. Strike him where he is weakest, in vulnerable childhood, in old age, slip the blow in between his ribs to where his heart lies: strike him where he is most man. The adversary who had struck this way had chosen to act the wolf, to frighten people (…). And the wolf believes that striking this way is the best way to strike fear. (91/103)

The wolf, in fact, is ever present in *Uomini e no*, namely in the guise of Black Dog, the mythical German executioner whose werewolf-like howl fills Milan with fear from the beginning (22-24, 72, 146/23-25, 82, 163) and who becomes Enne 2's personal nemesis, his obsession (163, 184-190/182, 204-211). In an ultimate self-sacrificial act Enne 2 reconciles himself[355] with doing the "simplest" thing, namely "kill Black Dog" (185/205), thus hoping to finally escape his existentialist "desert":

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[355] Even though, arguably, Enne 2 needs Barca Tartaro (the worker who, inspired by Enne 2, subsequently decides to enter the resistance and who has the final word of the novel, the famous "I'll learn better" (197/219)) to give him the idea of 'taking Cane Nero with him' in a kamikaze act. The promise to "learn better" is also echoed in the "Postscript" that Vittorini reinserted in the definitive edition and is thus given particular emphasis.

> *He has his desert around him; and it isn't just his alone; it is everyone's as well. A desert of sand and rock, Africa, Australia, America; with that shouting voice resounding in every desert. Is it a beast's voice? A man's? Maybe it is just Black Dog, and nothing else. Yet it comes unto us like a cry of the city itself, of the whole world.* (189/210)

We thus return to the question that has long been exercising the literary critics of resistance literature and *Uomini e no* in particular: how to interpret this (self-)sacrifice by Enne 2?

Sacrifice

> In man an old greybeard father has been sleeping for ages. We remember him; he is our father who built the ark, the laborious father; he toiled and he wrought, and he drank and he got drunk, and he laughed as he slept naked down through the ages. (*MNM* 105/*UN* 118; chapter 73)
>
> [Y]ou have nothing to lose than your anthropocentrism![356]

How to 'resolve' these obvious contradictions within sacrificial humanism and the resulting feeling of inconclusiveness that a reading of *Uomini e no* inevitably leaves? How to make sense of human evil? How to judge the intuition of the greater humanity of the victim? How to accept the 'human condition'? How to face the bestiality – the wolf in man – without compromising (human) solidarity? The unresolved and unresolvable conundrum of (sacrificial) humanism is where posthumanism and the question of the (nonhuman) animal begin to productively haunt *Uomini e no*.

As Cary Wolfe explains, "the discourse of animality has historically served as a crucial strategy in the oppression of *humans* by other humans – a strategy whose legitimacy and force depend, however, on the prior taking for granted of the traditional ontological distinction, and consequent ethical divide, between human and nonhuman animals."[357] Timothy Morton makes a similar point in *Humankind* in which he argues for what might be called a posthumanist, postanthropocentric politics based on a new 'solidarity with nonhumans'. This politics might finally overcome the dialectic of racism and speciesism that has been characterising (liberal) humanism's dilemma, namely:

> Which subtends the other, racism or speciesism? Does racism exist because we discriminate between humans and every other life form? Or does speciesism exist because we hold racist beliefs about people who don't look exactly like us?[358]

The decision (which comes first, speciesism or racism?), ultimately, proves to be irrelevant if viewed from postanthropocentric solidarity based on the idea of an "inter-animality" of human and nonhuman animals.[359] Vittorini's sacrificial humanism does indeed seem to be going somewhat into the direction of interanimal solidarity by showing that dehumanisation/bestialisation is an essential possibility of humanity, which leads him to resist the idea of a division between humanity and an (animalised) ‘subhumanity’. However, from a posthumanist animal studies perspective Vittorini’s treatment of dogs in *Uomini e no* nevertheless remains compromised. Not because of ‘sentimentalism’ or all too human anthropomorphism *vis-à-vis* Käptn Blut, Son-of-God’s favourite,[360] but because of the janus-faced nature of the domesticated animal that a dog necessarily is. It is a ‘nature’ that dogs essentially share with humans. Dogs are quite special animals indeed in that they, in a humanist sense, coincide with and mirror the human species’s own (self)domestication. The story that humanism tells itself is that of a *humanitas* to be achieved by leaving *animalitas* behind, without, however, ever being able to do so completely. It is a (Hobbesian) ‘breeding’ process aimed at overcoming the ‘wolf’ in ‘man’, mirrored in eradicating the ‘wolf’ (not to speak of the hyena) in ‘dogs’. Dogs being ‘man’s best friend’, are thus ‘co-implicated’ in the “subjugation and sacrifice of other animals”.[361] In fact, Vittorini’s stance in *Uomini e no*, and entertained by sacrificial humanism more generally, would not work, if the distinction between wolf and dog (or bad dog/good dog) did not exist. Vittorini’s move, in *Uomini e no*, maybe unintentionally, pushes the sacrificial logic that the victim is always more ‘human’ to its animalist extreme, if not over the edge or into the abyss (namely, the one between humans and nohumans). Blut needs to decide, whether he is to be part of the wolves, or, whether he is on the side of Black Dog, who is the incarnation of the wolf, the beast that knows “the best way to strike a man” (*MNM* 91/*UN* 103). Whether he follows his orders/instincts to kill the ‘innocent’ or to become part of the (truly human) humans and thus to return to and remain within the ‘human sphere’. The promise held out to Blut in this is that he might become (almost) human.[362] Once Blut has opts to be part of the killing machine, however, he is barred from humanity. As for the human perpetrator, however, he cannot (and must not) be granted the ‘descent’ into ‘wolfness’. He cannot leave humanity behind: “Whatever else could he be? Wolf?”, the narrator asks (162/180), quite obviously, rhetorically. One cannot help but wonder whether Enne 2’s self-sacrifice in the run-up to which he has to ‘unlearn’ his most *humane*

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[356] Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, p. 75.

[357] Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. xx.

[358] Cf. Morton, *Humankind*, p. 133.

[359] Crowley, in fact, evokes Merleau-Ponty's notion of "inter-animality" as part of a process of overcoming our repressed solidarity with nonhuman animals based on a shared experience of finitude

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(cf. *L’Homme sans*, pp. 135-136). A similar point against human exceptionalism and for a politics of solidarity that recognises that “the world in which we live is gazed upon by other beings, that the visible is shared among creatures, and that a politics could be invented on this basis, if it is not too late”, is also made by Jean-Christophe Bailly, in *The Animal Side*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p. 15. Matthew Callarco’s call for a “jamming of the anthropological machine” (as articulated in Agamben’s *The Open*) also starts from the assumption that “Inasmuch as humanism is founded on a separation of the *humanitas* from the *animalitas* within the human, no genuinely post-humanist politics can emerge without grappling with the logic and consequences of this division” (cf. Callarco and Steven DeCaroli, eds., *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 166).

[360] As Morton points out, in order to achieve new solidarity (between humans and nonhumans) “the actual enemy is not anthropomorphism, it is anthropocentrism, an entirely different beast that can express itself either by humanizing or indeed by totally dehumanizing it” (*Humankind*, p. 174).

[361] As Karalyn Kendall-Morwick rightly remarks in her reading of Samuel Beckett’s and Emmanuel Levinas’s dogs and their role within a “posthumanist ethics” (cf. Kendall-Morwick, “Dogging the Subject: Samuel Beckett, Emmanuel Levinas, and Posthumanist Ethics”, *Journal of Modern Literature* 36.3 (2013): 100-119 (esp. p. 103)).

[362] Again, the parallels between speciesism, colonialism and racism should be emphasised here.

instincts in order to become a pure killing-machine (“Nothing else remains, in the room, but a death-dealing machine, two pistols in hand” (190-191/211)), in its sacrificial logic, does not also erase all remaining differences between him and Black Dog, between human and wolf, between human and dog, and between dog and wolf. This would indeed be a radical move to protect the sanctity of human life and the integrity of the victims. No wonder that Vittorini had such trouble embracing the idea of violence as a necessary evil for resistance, all the while insisting on the integrity of ‘mankind’. The end of *Uomini e no*, which in many ways is the most troubling part of the novel, deliberately ‘rehumanises’ the resistance movement. While the ‘worker’ in stepping into the intellectual Enne 2’s footsteps goes through a ‘learning process’ of becoming an unscrupulous instrument of ‘liberation’ (after killing his first German soldiers whom he refer to as “dogs” (193/214)), he cannot bring himself to shoot the ‘sad’ German with whom he identifies as a fellow member of the exploited class (i.e. a fellow ‘victim’). He promises to become better at (self)dehumanisation, supposedly, to “learn better” (197/219), maybe to become a kind of ‘sacrifice-machine’ (like Enne 2, but without the latter’s final scruples).

As the sacrificial logic of humanism thus continues to turn against itself – and this is ultimately what I would claim is playing itself out in *Uomini e no* – it may be worth recalling Derrida’s critique of both Heidegger and Levinas, arguably themselves the most ‘desperately’ humanist of humanism’s critics, namely that despite the “disruptions [Levinas and Heidegger] produce in traditional humanism, and despite the differences that separate them” (as Elisabeth de Fontenay explains),[363] both “remain profound humanisms to the extent that they do not sacrifice sacrifice”.[364] *Uomini e no*’s greatest achievement might thus be to show that sacrificing sacrifice remains posthumanism’s most difficult as well as its most urgent task.

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[363] Elisabeth de Fontenay, “Return to Sacrifice”, trans. Catherine Porter, *Yale French Studies* 127 (2015): 201.

[364] Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well’, or the Calculation of the Subject”, in: *Points…: Interviews, 1974-1994*, trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 279.

8 Animalities – Milan Kundera and the Unbearable Lightness of Being Posthuman[365]

> [T]otal humanization of the animal coincides with a total animalization of man.[366]

Dog Stories

> If I have a dog, my dog has a human; what that means concretely is at stake.[367]

Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was first published in Czech in 1984 and translated into English the same year. Most criticism of Kundera's novel has tended to focus on either the political subtext (the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968) or the personal fate of the four main characters of the story (Tomas, Sabina, Franz and Tereza). Comparatively little attention has been given to what is arguably a fifth, and maybe even central character in this novel: namely, Karenin, Tereza's and Tomas's dog.[368] The last of the seven sections of the novel is entitled "Karenin's Smile" and contains one of the most moving descriptions of the death of ‘man’s best friend’. Read at a superficial level, the account of losing Karenin might be misunderstood as just another deeply sentimental, humanist or anthropocentric story about a thoroughly anthropomorphised nonhuman animal serving as a stand-in for the ‘missing child’ in the novel. On a more sympathetic reading, however, it becomes clear that there is more than mere narcissistic anthropomorphising and pathos at work here. There is indeed a profound metaphysical engagement with the philosophical ‘question of the animal’. Karenin, as well as Mephisto, the mayor’s pet pig, play an important part in the narrative, and so do Tereza’s cows, as well as animals more generally. The consequence is that the relationship between humanity and animality is a theme that runs throughout the novel and is openly problematised in some of its central passages. So intense is this questioning, I would argue, that it in fact anticipates many aspects of the so-called ‘animal turn’ within critical posthumanist thought. This turn towards the ‘question of the animal’, or, indeed, ‘the animal as question’, has been focusing on a peculiar ambiguity at the heart of the relationship between human and nonhuman animals.

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[365] *A note on the text:*
The original version of this chapter was written in 2006 and, of course, the discussion about animal rights and animal studies in particular has moved on. The reason I am publishing it here nevertheless is to remind myself and others that critical posthumanism (CPH) did not focus exclusively on the technological aspect of posthumanism and its critique – an impression one might have got from my own *Posthumanismus: Eine kritische Einführung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009) and its English translation, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), as well as many other critically posthumanist work in that same phase. What the below reading of Kundera's novel, in my view, reassuringly demonstrates is that CPH was well aware of its 'animal side' practically from the start – a side that, in my view, has not ceased to grow in importance given the discussion about biopolitics and climate change which started around the same time as the Kundera essay was written, and given the general focus on transhumanism that the technological side of 'our' becoming 'posthuman' has taken. I therefore feel justified in reproducing my 'posthumanist reading' of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* here in what is almost its original form, in which has been available on Academia.edu for a while. My approach here takes Kundera's novel as 'test case' for animal studies, CPH and the (philosophical) 'question of the animal' (which of course goes beyond the nevertheless important issue of 'animal rights'). At its starting point, it does in fact resemble Bruce Lord's 2003 online text "Karenin's Smile: Notes Towards Animal Rights Literary Criticism", available online at: http://bruce.bruce.nmsrv.com/karenins_smile.html (accessed 14/12/2023) –a text I was not aware of at the time, but which I would like to recommend as a possible (re)entry point today.

[366] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 77.

[367] Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), p. 54.

[368] While there are of course many books and articles on Kundera and *Unbearable Lightness* I am aware of only three articles published since 2006 that contain a focus on Karenin: Marie-Odile Thirouin points out the important opposition between the dog and kitsch in the novel, in "La tentation de l'anti-humanisme dans l'oeuvre de Kundera", in: Thirouin and Martine Boyer-Weinmann, eds., *Désaccords parfaits: La reception paradoxale de l'oeuvre de Milan Kundera* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 2009), pp. 291-304. More specifically linking Karenin to ethical questions are Harry Sewall's "Contested Epistemological and Ethical Spaces: The Place of Non-Humans in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and J.M.Coetzee's *Disgrace*", *English Academy Review* 30.1 (2013): 76-91; and Joseph Mai's "Humanity's 'True Moral Test': Shame, Idyll, and Animal Vulnerability in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*", *Studies in the Novel* 46.1 (2014): 100-116.

At a time when the largely imaginary or ‘fictional’ boundaries around human essence and truth are eroding fast it is maybe not surprising to find that theorisations of the human and his or her ‘animal others’ are proliferating. ‘The animal’ is without doubt one, if not the most, essential of all human (significant) others. However, what is rather surprising is that posthumanist theory, which has given space to so many *animaux* (animals) and *animots* (animetaphors; Derrida’s term) has so far largely ignored Kundera’s novel. In my view, Kundera prompts a critical thinking of ‘animalities’ that in many ways anticipates the rise of posthumanist animal studies. In my reading of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* I will place Kundera’s novel alongside some of the ground-breaking zoophile posthumanist work of the past decades to show that, as Manuela Rossini aptly put it, posthumanism has gone ‘to the dogs’.[369] Going to the dogs is of course not meant in a negative way here. On the contrary, it marks a development, coinciding in particular with Donna Haraway’s work, away from the centrality of the technoscientific metaphor of the cyborg – a figure that materialist technofeminists have tried to wrest away from the patriarchal symbolic order of late capitalist society in its state of accelerated ‘posthumanisation’ – and a move towards other, maybe ‘earlier’ figures to provide additional historical depth to the ongoing critique of liberal humanism.

Haraway, in her *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, characterises this development thus:

> [I]n 1985, I published “The Cyborg Manifesto” to try to make feminist sense of the implosions of contemporary technoscience. Cyborgs are ‘cybernetic organisms’, named in 1960 in the context of the space race, the cold war, and imperialist fantasies of technohumanism built into policy and research projects. I tried to inhabit cyborgs critically; i.e. neither in celebration nor condemnation, but in a spirit of ironic appropriation for ends never envisioned by the space warriors. Telling a story of co-habitation, co-evolution, and embodied cross-species sociality, the present manifesto

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[369] Manuela Rossini, “To the Dogs: Companion Speciesism and the New Feminist Materialism”, *Kritikos* 3 (2006), available online at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254870797_To_the_Dogs_Companion_speciesism_and_the_new_feminist_materialism (accessed 14/12/2023).

> asks which of two cobbled together figures – cyborgs and companion species – might more fruitfully inform livable politics and ontologies in current life worlds.[370]

Going to the dogs thus does not mean a rejection of the cyborg and critical cyborg writing (an ironic 'inhabiting' and 'appropriation' of what Rossini calls "popular (cybernetic) post-humanism"). Rather it involves a remembering of other and earlier 'significant others' and an embedding of postmodern technoscience within the longer history of what Haraway refers to as 'natureculture(s)'. Haraway herself hints at the fact that the technoscientific figure of the cyborg might be somehow dated and that her original critical appropriation might in turn have been reappropriated by what she refers to as 'transhumanism', with its driving force of techno-logical determinism:

> I appropriated cyborgs to do feminist work in Reagan's Star Wars times of the mid-1980s. By the end of the millennium, cyborgs could no longer do the work of a proper herding dog to gather up the threads needed for critical inquiry. So I go happily to the dogs to explore the birth of the kennel to help craft tools for science studies and feminist theory in the present time, when secondary Bushes threaten to replace the old growth of more livable natureculture in the carbon budget politics of all water-based life on earth.[371]

The shift from cyborg to companion species thus mirrors the historical shift from Reaganomics to George W. Bush's neoconservatism, from technoscience to bioscience, from Star Wars to Bioterror. It seems that the turn from techno- to bio- (or indeed technobio-) opens up more profound, 'earlier', uncertainties over boundaries and significant otherness for Haraway: "I risk alienating my old doppelganger, the cyborg, in order to try to convince readers that dogs might be better guides through the thickets of technobiopolitics in the Third Millennium of the Current Era".[372]

To be fair, like any other 'posting', Haraway's 'post-cyborgian' move is not a simple superseding but rather a complication of the question of origin and evolution. After all, 'the animal' and 'the machine' have been co-haunting humanity and humanism from its beginnings. And already, in her "Cyborg Manifesto", Haraway had spoken of the joint kinship between people, animals and machines, and of the fact that "by the late twentieth century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal [was] thoroughly breached".[373] The "second leaky distinction" which made the cyborg figure a necessity, as Haraway declared, was that "between animal-human (organism) and machine". The 'post-cyborg' move thus makes visible, in a retroactive way, previous "leaky" distinctions within humanism: "Post-cyborg, what counts as biological kind troubles previous categories of organism. The machinic and the textual are internal to the organic and vice versa in irreversible ways."[374] Hence Haraway's privileging of concepts like 'co-evolution', 'symbiosis' and 'natureculture'. As she goes on to explain: "I have come to see cyborgs as junior siblings in the much bigger, queer family of companion species, in which reproductive biotechnopolitics are generally a surprise, sometimes even a nice surprise".[375] Humans' biosociality with dogs in particular is part of this rewriting of history in terms of the co-implication of nature and culture. In a sense, Haraway emphasises the earlier dog-people-universe and, in turn, relativises the cyborg figure, by subsuming it within a wealth of companion species relationships. In doing so, she in fact transfers the cyborg figure's critical potential from a purely technoscientific reading to a technobiopolitical understanding of posthuman culture. However, like 'cyborg writing', 'dog writing' for Haraway remains part of a (feminist) materialist critique that is paying close attention to questions of embodiment, biopolitics and ethical responses to 'speciesism'.

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[370] Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, p. 4.

[371] *Ibid*., pp. 4-5.

[372] *Ibid*., pp. 9-10.

[373] Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 9.

[374] Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, p. 15.

It is in this context that the critical aspect of anthropomorphism should be noted. Dogs, as arguably humans closest companion species, according to Haraway, nevertheless have the right to "a category of their own".[376] Their co-evolution makes them humans' (significant) others but in a non-narcissistic way, or at least potentially so. Dogs ask specific 'ethical' questions of 'their' humans that cannot and should not be understood as purely anthropomorphic, that is not as 'projections' of human desires onto their animal others, or as either in some sense 'tragic-cathartic' (i.e. the animal's vulnerability, suffering, silence, which are all usually understood as somehow 'lacking' compared to humans) or 'comic-mechanic' (i.e. the less(er)-than-human, and the 'abyssal' categorical difference between 'us' and 'them'). This is what is at stake in an analysis of the very 'special' literary dog named Karenin.

Karenin is introduced as a kind of 'hybrid' and 'post-gender' dog and thus actually bears important traits reminiscent of Haraway's cyborg. Karenin is "a bitch whose body seemed reminiscent of the German shepherd and whose head belonged to its Saint Bernard mother",[377] named not after Anna Karenina, as Tereza suggested, but Karenin, Anna's husband; and thus a female dog with a male name and referred to by the male personal pronoun throughout the novel, and who, as a result, develops 'lesbian tendencies'. The relationship between Tereza (and Tomas) and Karenin is beyond pity or responsibility, but instead is based on "selfless love". Tereza, for example, believes that:

> dogs were never expelled from Paradise (…). Karenin knew nothing about the duality of body and soul and had no concept of disgust. That is why Tereza felt so free and easy with him. (And that is why it is so dangerous to turn an animal into a machine animate, a cow into an automaton for the production of milk. By so doing, man cuts the thread binding him to Paradise and has nothing left to hold or comfort him on his flight through the emptiness of time.). (*ULB* 297)

Karenin is thus not to be misunderstood as a classic child-replacement of the 'biologically unreproductive' human couple, as the narrator explains: "the love that tied her to Karenin was better than the love between her and Tomas. Better, not bigger (…) given the nature of the human couple, the love of man and woman is a priori inferior to that which can exist (at least in the best instances) in the love between man and dog, that oddity of human history probably unplanned by the Creator. It is a completely selfless love" (*ULB* 297). This is an important reversal of what Haraway calls (in analogy to 'technophiliac narcissism' – a 'humanist neurosis' by which "man makes himself by realizing his intentions in his tools, such as domestic animals (dogs) and computers (cyborgs)"), 'caninophiliac narcissism', or "the idea that dogs restore human beings' souls by their unconditional love."[378] Tereza's selfless love is not about saving herself or regaining any kind of plenitude or returning to a prelapsarian Edenic condition. It is not a question of Karenin's unconditional love making humans somehow 'better', but rather the opposite, namely attaining a knowledge of the animal other *as* other.

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[375] Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, p. 300.

[376] Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, pp. 88ff.

[377] Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 24 (further references to the novel will be given in the text as *ULB*).

According to Will McNeill, this is also what Heidegger's interpretation of the animal as being 'poor in world' (*weltarm*) attempts to show: "the objection of anthropomorphism or anthropocentrism is always fundamentally a thoughtless or unquestioning one, insofar as it presupposes that we know what the essence of man or *anthropos* is."[379] What is noteworthy here, however, is that in following this line of argument McNeill is in fact opposed to most zoophile theorists, who tend to interpret Heidegger's attitude towards 'the animal' as not very charitable and, indeed, as anthropocentric and even essentially 'anthropo-essentialist'. As McNeill explains: "Heidegger is precisely not trying to understand the essence of the animal in itself, but to understand it *as other*, in its otherness" (26).[380] Being, for Heidegger, is an "opening and access to otherness" and it is in this sense that the (nonhuman) animal may be said to be 'poor', or at least 'poorer' (in 'world'), than the human (animal):

> The animal has a relation to other things, and openness for other things. But it cannot experience these other things as other, and this because it has no relation to concealment and withdrawal. It seems that it cannot appear to us as such, as what it is, because it refuses itself, withdraws. But the reverse is the case: it refuses itself from us and withdraws because it cannot show itself as such, because it cannot point towards concealment. It is only human beings that can point towards concealment as such and that are drawn towards withdrawal. For this reason alone we can appear and show ourselves to one another as other.[381]

In fact, it seems that the animal's *Weltarmut* for McNeill following Heidegger is not that different from Lacan's attempt to construct an ontological difference between human and animal on the basis of the former's ability of deception. The animal cannot appear (to humans) as other in the same way as humans can appear to themselves as other, which seems to boil down, in fact, to a rather simplistic and counter-intuitive statement that denies animals any form of intentionality.

In Kundera's novel, however, it is the humans who seem rather 'poor in world', while the animal, in the form of Karenin at least, seems surprisingly rich in knowledge, time and happiness. Both Tomas and Tereza realise that Karenin has been in a sense their 'home'. Their triangular relationship, or their particular 'natureculture' and biosociality echoes Haraway's words, who, in relation to dog training or domestication, says: "Just *who* is at home must permanently be in question. The recognition that one cannot know the other or the self, but must ask in respect for all the time who and what are emerging in relationship, is the key. That is so for all true lovers, of whatever species."[382] This 'otherness-in-relation' that both Haraway and Tereza decide to call 'love' between species is in fact a "being in connection with significant otherness and signifying others" (81).[383] It of course in no way guarantees the overcoming of anthropomorphism (and anthropocentrism) as such, if indeed that is possible, but it is the necessary precondition for any serious critique of anthropocentrism to begin with. Just how such a 'post-anthropocentric' reading might work for CPH is the focus of the remaining part of this chapter.

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[378] Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, p. 33.

[379] Will McNeill, *Heidegger: Visions of Animals, Others, and the Divine* (University of Warwick: Research Publication Series: Centre for Research in Philosophy and Literature, 1993), p. 25.

[380] *Ibid*., p. 26.

[381] *Ibid*., pp. 66-67.

Zoohauntology

> Our very empathy with the plight of the other being requires us to respect their difference from us and the ways this may affect our capacity to 'speak' on their behalf.[384]

The Unbearable Lightness of Being seems of course blissfully oblivious to all these articulations. Although it is very much a 'philosophical novel' (a *roman à idées*) – indeed, it already announces a certain ontology in its title – it is of course free from systematic theorisation, ontological or otherwise, of the relation between humans and animals. Nevertheless it is also a novel written in a highly self-reflexive and ironical tone, with a narrator who clearly functions as a post-Nietzschean and postmodern commentator for whom politics, aesthetics and cultural anthropology open the space for historiographic metafiction (in Linda Hutcheon's sense).[385] It is tempting to see the novel as a fictional extension of cultural criticism, somewhere in between a commentary on communist experience and capitalist practice, by which the idea of human individuality is both humbled but also, in the end, reaffirmed. If there was something like ironic or detached existentialism, Kundera's novel would probably qualify as a prime example. In any case it certainly performs a critique of the liberal humanist idea of the autonomous self that is not too different in its presuppositions from that of CPH, especially in those of its representatives who continue in poststructuralist and deconstructionist trajectories. It scrutinises the humanity of its characters and their environment from an ontological rather than an epistemological point of view (cf. Brian McHale's distinction) and evaluates the 'life choice' of the postmodern individual rather than of the modern subject (following Rosenau's terminology).[386]

This is where Kundera's ontology of 'weight and lightness' becomes relevant. Of the seven sections of the novel two bear the title "Lightness and Weight" (parts one and five). The first part opens with a deliberation on Nietzsche's myth of the eternal return: "Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing" (*ULB* 3). There is a powerful critique of the transitoriness and the 'lightness' of modernity and its 'cynicism' in which ‘everything is pardoned in advance’ since it only ever occurs once (Kundera’s ‘*einmal ist keinmal*’). The eternal return would instead take away the ‘mitigating circumstance’ of this transitory nature, oppose the ‘aura of nostalgia’ when faced with the ephemeral, and ‘weigh down’ existence: “In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make” (*ULB* 5). The undeniable merit of Kundera’s novel is that it shows the complexity and ambiguity that arises out of this distinction of the weight of unbearable responsibility provided by the idea of the eternal return, and that “our lives stand out against it in all their splendid lightness” (*ULB* 5). “The lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all” (6), and it is an opposition that is obviously related to the question of posthistory and posthumanity: “What happened but once might as well not have happened at all (…). History is as light as individual human life, unbearably light, light as a feather, as dust swirling into air, as whatever will no longer exist tomorrow” (223).

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[382] Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, p. 50.

[383] *Ibid*., p. 81.

[384] Kate Soper, "Humans, Animals, Machines", *New Formations* 43 (2003): 105.

[385] Cf. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988).

[386] Cf. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987); Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

The destiny of the two couples of its main (human) characters – Tereza and Tomas, Franz and Sabina – plays itself out within this paradigm. Tomas tends to err on the side of lightness (“what can life be worth if the first rehearsal for life is life itself (…) if we only have one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all” (8)). He, the incorrigible womaniser, is weighed down by responsibility and love for Tereza, who arrives with a heavy suitcase (like an “abandoned child”) with her high moral principles of fidelity. Tomas’s compassion (“*Es muss sein*”), his conscience, make him bow to “necessity” and its “metaphysical weights” (33). In Part Five, it is precisely the image of the abandoned child and the question of responsibility, knowledge and guilt that causes Tomas’s professional ‘downfall’. In an academic publication Tomas contrasts Oedipus’s admission of his guilt, responsibility and self-punishment despite his lack of knowledge, with the communists’ post-1968 claim towards ‘innocence’ on the basis that they were misled by their own ‘idealism’. As a result he loses his right to practise as a neurosurgeon and instead becomes a window cleaner. However, when invited to sign a petition for the release of political prisoners he renounces any political activism and instead remembers Tereza’s image as she tries saving a crow that was cruelly buried alive by some (‘innocent’) children: “It is much more important to dig a half-buried crow out of the ground (…) than to send petitions to a president” (219-220), Tomas decides. This very Nietzschean transvaluation of values – the lightness of animal rescue placed above the weightiness of political resistance – has earned Kundera a lot of disapproval from all kinds of factions engaged in what the novel itself refers to as “The Grand March”: “The dictatorship of the proletariat or democracy? Rejection of the consumer society or demands for increased productivity? The guillotine or an end to the death penalty? It is all beside the point. What makes a leftist a leftist is not this or that theory but his ability to integrate any theory into the kitsch called the Grand March” (257). This choice would certainly imply a rejection of any political movement, let’s say the movement for animal rights (to be classified under “kitsch” following the narrator), but would at the same time suggest a radical responsibility towards all forms of life and especially the most vulnerable, singular animal, like for example a cruelly trapped crow (i.e. a curious embrace of the ‘unbearable’ ambiguity of lightness and weight of and in being).

Kundera’s notion of kitsch is of course central to understanding the idea of the “unbearable lightness of being” and the relation between the political and the ethical, as well as between metaphysics and aesthetics. The interesting aspect for the question of the posthumanist question of the animal in this is how Kundera’s novel manages to represent animal ‘liberationist’ issues without being political about them, not even ethical strictly speaking, but rather strictly metaphysical and aesthetic. Kundera seems to object to liberal humanism for aesthetic reasons, not in order to develop a radical antihumanism, but maybe rather a Nietzschean kind of transvaluation of all (human) values, or indeed a kind of 'superhumanism' without 'superman', however. Ironically, kitsch itself is related to what the narrator refers to as a "theodicy of shit" (246-7): "Shit is a more onerous theological problem than is evil. Since God gave man freedom, we can, if need be, accept the idea that He is not responsible for man's crimes. The responsibility for shit, however, rests entirely with Him, the Creator of man" (246). It follows that as long as man stayed in paradise he either did not defecate or he simply experienced no disgust at defecating. With the expulsion from Eden comes disgust, shame and as a result of shame, excitement and sexuality. The human problem is therefore: what to do with our defecating existence – a rather 'down-to-earth' parody of the Heideggerian "*Dasein-zum-Tode*", one might say. The metaphysical objection to shit goes through a categorical agreement with being which, on an aesthetic level, leads to the denial and repression of the excremental: "This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch (…) kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence" (248). Its true function is "a folding screen set up to curtain off death" (253). The painter Sabina (who is Tomas's mistress, and for whom Tomas is the absolute opposite to kitsch) resists communism not because of political repression but for "the mask of beauty it tried to wear – in other words, Communist kitsch" (249). The opposition to the 'leftist kitsch' of the Grand March, in fact, calls for a radical individualism: "The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch" (251). Sabina does not see much difference between Soviet kitsch and American kitsch. If anything she would "unhesitatingly prefer life in a real Communist regime with all its persecution and meat queues", but in "the world of the Communist ideal made real, in that world of grinning idiots, she would have nothing to say, she would die of horror within a week" (253). What makes both Sabina and Tomas 'anti-revolutionaries' is that for them people who struggle in their political resistance movements against totalitarian regimes are just as opposed to ambiguity, to the individual asking questions, to uncertainties, as the ideologies they fight against: "They, too, need certainties and simple truths to make the multitudes understand, to provoke collective tears" (254). In other words, kitsch does not know any political allegiance and in the context of the breakdown of certainties and the proliferation of lies, being acquires this 'unbearable lightness' which can only be embraced by radical opposition to kitsch and its constant 'betrayal'.

It could be argued that Kundera's kitsch is in fact strikingly close to Roland Barthes's idea of a myth as a culturally produced technique of 'naturalisation':

> As soon as kitsch is recognized for the lie it is, it moves into the context of non-kitsch, thus losing its authoritarian power and becoming as touching as any other human weakness. For none among us is superhuman enough to escape kitsch completely. No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition. (*ULB* 256).

In terms of the human/nonhuman theme and the question of humanism the rejection of kitsch is equally relevant. The last part of the novel deals explicitly with the relation between humans and animals, humans and their pets, and also with the relation between pets and domestic and other animals. It does therefore justice to one of the main claims in current posthumanist animal studies, namely that it is wrong to speak of 'the animal question', for two reasons. Firstly, 'the animal' is an outrageous singular (as Derrida points out), behind which hide singularities, complexities. The categorical 'animal' serves to create a distance that does not exist. Secondly, there are a number of difficulties surrounding the idea that animals are denied a ‘response’ in this question-and-answer session. The whole issue of communicative interaction, the possibility of dialogue, animal intersubjectivity, and practices of interpellation and subjection is at stake in the usual denial of an animal(’s) response, or in the anthropomorphic practice of speaking ‘for’ *the* animal.[387]

The bone of contention for zoophile theorists and various ‘caninists’ is what to do with the difference that remains once the radical difference between human and animal, once the ‘speciesism’ has been unmasked as a construct, once its essence has been divested of any foundations.[388] What to do with the *radical* difference, or otherness, the difference of difference, the other of the other that somehow remains and resists, one might ask? Here, we are of course confronting the Derridean notion of *différance*. Derrida himself seems happy to merely track down and problematise the humanist, or speciesist residue in the two thinkers who have pushed the question of the human to its limits – Heidegger and Levinas. Derrida’s argument in *Of Spirit*, “Eating Well”, “The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” as well as “And Say the Animal Responded” is that neither Heidegger’s metaphysical humanism, which grants the animal a certain ‘openness’ towards being but denies it any access to being *as* being (i.e. *Dasein*), nor Levinas’s ethical humanism, which implies some human responsibility towards the nonhuman other but denies the animal a face, radically challenge the metaphysical opposition between animal and human. However, for Derrida the aim can also not be to completely efface that difference.[389] This erasure would lend itself undoubtedly to the ‘worst’: namely, a mere reversal of the humanist hierarchy with some form of generalised animality or a general ‘becoming-animal’, which would be ethically and critically very badly equipped to deal with all the numerous occasions on which animalisation is merely used for a dehumanisation of humans. Derrida is wary of both, purification and deliberate contamination of categories, and instead, in true deconstructive and genealogical manner, he follows the trace of an ‘earlier’ distinction underlying the very opposition of (hu)man/animal. In his interview with Elisabeth Roudinesco, “Violence Against Animals”, he says:

> Beginning with *Of Grammatology*, the elaboration of a new concept of the *trace* had to be extended to the entire field of the living, or rather to the life/death relation, beyond the anthropological limits of ‘spoken’ language (or ‘written’ language, in the ordinary

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[387] Cf. in particular Derrida’s “And Say the Animal Responded,” in: Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 121-46.

[388] Note the almost irrepressible desire in all animal writing to playfully draw on the complete register of animal metaphors or “animetaphors” (cf. Akira Mizuta Lippit, “Magnetic Animal: Derrida, Wildlife, *Animetaphor*”, *MLN* 113.5 (1998): 1111-1125) to ‘lighten up’ the unbearable weightiness of the animal-question; there is something deeply comic about the animal other, closely connected of course to its proximity to the machine and the mechanistic, following Bergson’s definition of the comic as “du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant” (cf. Henri Bergson, *Le rire* (Paris: PUF, 2007)).

[389] Cf. Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject: an Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?* Eds. Eduardo Cadava et al. (New York: Routledge: 1991), 96-119; “The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”, *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002): 369-418; and “And Say the Animal Responded”, *op. cit*.

> sense), beyond the phonocentrism or the logocentrism that always trusts in a simple and oppositional limit between Man and the Animal.[390]

Following the trace of an alterity *before* the distinction between human and animal, Derrida returns to the idea of an irreducible multiplicity: "there is a multiplicity of living beings, a multiplicity of animals, some of which do not fall within what this grand discourse on the Animal claims to attribute to them or recognize in them. Man is one of them, and an irreducibly singular one, of course, as we know, but it is not the case that it is Man *versus* THE Animal".[391] There are two aspects pointed out here by Derrida that often become confused in zoophile cultural criticism: the singularity of the human animal among the multiplicity of animals and the living in general, on the one hand; and the problematic nature of the underlying distinction in the opposition between human/nonhuman, which also constitutes the trace, or 'writing', or indeed the 'mark', in the Derridean sense, as a possibility for a truly posthumanist thinking, beyond both animal and human, on the other. It is only the latter, from a posthumanist point of view, that can do justice to the multiplicity of living beings precisely at a time (as Haraway indicated) when the boundary between organic and inorganic is (also) being eroded. Or, in other words, as the boundary between human and nonhuman animals erodes, the boundary between human and machine, organic and inorganic is also challenged and thus threatens to 'overtake' the 'animal question'.

Despite all his sympathy for animal ethics, Derrida believes that the implementation of animal 'rights' is counterproductive since rights still presupposes a notion of responsibility based on the (human) subject and (human) language-response: "to confer or to recognize rights for 'animals' is a surreptitious or implicit way of confirming a certain interpretation of the human subject, which itself will have been the very lever of the worst violence carried out against nonhuman living beings."[392] Derrida is certainly also not against the 'practice' of becoming a vegetarian but he does oppose radical 'vegetarianism' simply because "it is not enough to stop eating meat in order to become a non-carnivore".[393] What he terms 'carnophallogocentrism' involves a symbolism of sacrifice and incorporation/ingestion that goes far beyond the human practice of eating meat and which is probably constitutive of consciousness and the distinction between self and other and arguably of the law as such. This is what Derrida means when he says that: "I do not believe in absolute 'vegetarianism', nor in the ethical purity of its intentions – nor even that it is rigorously tenable, without a compromise or without a symbolic substitution. I would go so far as to claim that, in a more or less refined, subtle, sublime form, a certain cannibalism remains unsurpassable".[394] The symbolic violence against animals – something that Derrida seeks to capture through the neologism '*animot*' (a contraction of animals/*animaux* and words/*mots*) – corresponds to a symbolic appropriation/ingestion on which human self-legitimation and identity (auto-biography and auto-immunity) are necessarily relying, as David Wood explains in his commentary on Derrida's "The Animal That Therefore I am…" (which was first delivered as a paper at a conference entitled "*L'animal autobiographique*"):

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[390] Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, "Violence Against Animals", in: *For What Tomorrow...* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 63.

[391] *Ibid.*

[392] Derrida and Roudinesco, "Violence Against Animals," p. 65.

[393] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

[394] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

> We may surmise that the (external) animal we eat stands in for the (internal) animal we must overcome. And by eating, of course, we internalize it! On this reading, our carnivorous violence towards other animals would serve as a mark of our civilization, and hence indirectly legitimate all kinds of other violence. If we are to target anything for transformation it would be this culture (or should we say cult) of fault and sacrifice.[395]

To return to Kundera's treatment of human responsibility *vis-à-vis* animals, the chapter entitled "Karenin's Smile" is of course an extreme example of anthropomorphism, which primarily elucidates Kundera's plainly humanist metaphysics. It is so moving to the human(ist) reader because the 'innocent' animal, the humanised pet, human's narcissistic other, dies *for* Tereza and Tomas. In the dog's suffering and death they believe to see a message for them, a mirror of their own lives and an answer to the question of the meaning of their being (and its 'unbearable lightness'). Of course, Karenin is only formally 'humanised' in this passage; he or rather she is denied (human) speech. Tomas's and Tereza's '*retour à la nature*' is a retreat mixed with romanticism, nostalgia, misogyny and cultural pessimism. And still, I would like to contest, it preempts most of the questions raised by posthumanist animal theory. It might even outdo some of it. Despite its sentimentalism bordering on kitsch itself ("Karenin's Smile" is the least 'ironic' part of the novel, stylistically the 'weightiest', with many authorial or narrator's interventions) it comes close to a reaffirmation of humanism 'without' humans, one might say, or indeed of humans without humanism. The 'pastoral' countryside retreat is both a liberation and withdrawal from communist persecution and technological modernity. Tereza and Tomas have sold everything ("their car, their television set, and their radio", *ULB* 281) and have (re)discovered an idyllic, repressed memory of a "harmonious world" of a "big happy family" (282). It is the paradisiac village world of Karenin (the individualised pet dog, the only dog unchained) and his friend Mefisto, the Mayor's pet pig: "But [Karenin] soon made friends with [Mefisto], even to the point of preferring him to the village dogs, because they were all chained to their doghouses and never stopped their silly, unmotivated barking. Karenin correctly assessed the value of being one of a kind, and I can state without compunction that he greatly appreciated his friendship" (284).

One might ask whether this in fact is a fable. What right does the narrator have to see 'friendship' between animals of two different domesticated species as between two 'individuals'? By abolishing the 'abyss' and by humanising animals the narrator is of course also opening up the possibility of the reverse, of animalising humans (and there are a number of occasions in the novel where animal metaphors are used to describe humans (Sabina, for example, compares Franz during their love-making to a "newborn animal" and to a "gigantic puppy suckling at her breasts" (116); while Tereza becomes a "sniffing dog" when she recognizes the "aroma of a woman's sex organs" on Tomas's hair). On these occasions, when animals are humanised and humans are animalised, the focus in current cultural criticism is usually on a 'politics of representation' involved in the anthropomorphic description of animals as well as the 'theriomorphic' imaging of humans.[396]

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[395] David Wood, "Thinking with Cats", in: Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton, eds., *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 139.

[396] "Theriomorphism is the reverse of anthropomorphism", as Greg Garrard notes in his *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 141.

The transgression of the (constructed human-animal) boundary can be used to all sorts of ends, both sinister and moralistic. The 'bestialisation' and dehumanisation of humans has led to the worst excesses of inhuman behaviour. And it is the strategic transgression of the human-animal boundary on the side of animality that continues to legitimate the worst forms of xenophobia and racism against humans (as for example to be seen in Levinas's account of his prison camp experience, cf. below). Kundera's novel is very much aware of this risk. On several occasions Tereza refers to the traumatic experience of Soviet dog persecution (cf. esp. *ULB* 288-9): "She recalled reading a two-line filler in the papers ten or so years ago about how all dogs in a certain Russian city had been summarily shot" (288). Tereza witnesses the same kind of animal cruelty in Prague after the Soviet invasion where people who had lost all faith in communism were looking for a substitute to "get back at life for something (…) with revenge on the brain (…). The substitute they lit upon was animals." Violence at first is directed against pigeons and then dogs until the real target, namely humans, come within reach:

> Only after a year did the accumulated malice (which until then had been vented, for the sake of training, on animals) find its true goal: people. People started being removed from their jobs, arrested, put on trial. At last the animals could breathe freely. (289)

Cruelty against animals is thus the first step towards violence against humans – a link that is also evident in the critique of the 'industrial' treatment of animals, i.e. modern practices of mass slaughter and their ('dreaded') comparison to the (human, Jewish) Holocaust, as Charles Patterson writes, in *Eternal Treblinka*.[397]

The precariousness of the human-animal boundary with its connected politics of representation of both anthropomorphism and theriomorphism is one of the main arguments for animal theorists to take the animal question *seriously*, as a move that will ultimately be beneficial for both human and nonhuman animals.[398] However, there is also a certain reductionism involved in this kind of well-meant representationism that claims that whatever you say about animals is inevitably anthropomorphic. For example it risks misunderstanding fiction like Kundera's novel, with its particular 'as if' structure;[399] and it also tends to simplify the whole problem of empathy and the question of other minds that is necessary to fundamentally change the relationship between human and nonhuman animals.[400]

A justification for rescuing Kundera from the accusation of anthropomorphism *and* anthropocentrism lies in a certain reversal of the idea of responsibility at work in the novel which is so central to the animal question in general (and it is worth remembering that, for Kundera, betrayal in the face of an impossible choice in fact is what calls for responsibility and justice in the first place, given the ‘unbearable lightness of being’). Karenin’s joy, after what must seem like a rebirth to ‘him’, on waking up from his anesthetics, is a happiness of return, within his circular ‘dog time’: “Who can tell what distances he covered on his way back? Who knows what phantoms he battled? And now that he was at home with his dear ones, he felt compelled to share his overwhelming joy, a joy of return and rebirth” (285). However, as the cancer progresses, Karenin is unable to take part in the rituals he himself helped create and which Tomas and Tereza have found so reassuring. The pain of watching the dog suffer gradually becomes unbearable. The novel is aware of the ‘helpless nature’ of its inevitably anthropomorphic representation in this episode. Tereza and Tomas take Karenin’s desire to interact with them and his yelps as signs of his happiness and his will to live: “Standing there watching him, they thought once more that he was smiling and that as long as he kept smiling he had a motive to keep living despite his death sentence” (292). There ultimately comes a point when both realise that Karenin in a sense starts ‘faking’ his smile: “‘He’s just doing it for us’, said Tereza. ‘He didn’t want to go for a walk. He’s just doing it to make us happy’” (293). This realisation sets up the final, maybe most fundamental transvaluation of values related to the ‘unbearable lightness of being’ – that of sadness and happiness: “It was sad what she said, yet without realizing it they were happy. They were happy not in spite of their sadness but thanks to it” (293). This anticipates, in fact, the final sequence before their own death: “She was experiencing the same odd happiness and odd sadness as then. The sadness meant: we are at the last station. The happiness meant: we are together. The sadness was form, the happiness was content. Happiness filled the space of sadness” (313-314).

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[397] Charles Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (New York: Lantern Books, 2002). Cf. also Marjorie Spiegel's *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (London: Mirror Books, 1996).

[398] Cf. esp. Cary Wolfe's *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) on this question.

[399] Cf. Derrida on literature's "as if structure", which allows it, in principle, to say anything, in: "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida", in: Derek Attridge, ed., *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-75.

[400] On understanding the animal question as part of the 'other minds' problem in philosophy see Thomas Nagel's "What is it like to be a bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83.4 (1974): 435-450.

What links happiness and sadness in Kundera’s metaphysics is the idea of the ‘idyllic’. The idyll is “an image that has remained with us like a memory of Paradise: life in Paradise was not like following a straight line to the unknown; it was not an adventure. It moved in a circle among objects. Its monotony bred happiness, not boredom” (295). The price for being human is to be subjected to consciousness’s dualism (soul and body) and self-identity (being an ‘I’). Having acquired disgust and desire, humans have lost direct access to the idyll. This is the source of humans’ ethical imperative towards animals and their ‘gift’: “No one can give anyone else the gift of the idyll; only an animal can do so, because only animals were not expelled from Paradise. The love between dog and man is idyllic. It knows no conflicts, no hair-raising scenes; it knows no development. Karenin surrounded Tereza and Tomas with a life based on repetition, and he expected the same from them” (298). Man’s plight is that “Human time does not turn in a circle; it runs ahead in a straight line. That is why man cannot be happy: happiness is the longing for repetition” (298). *Einmal ist keinmal*. This is what makes the ‘selfless love’ between human and animal ‘sacred’. It outdoes the love between humans in quality, in purity and selflessness: “given the nature of the human couple, the love of man and woman is a priori inferior to that which can exist (at least in the best instances) in the love between man and dog, that oddity of human history probably unplanned by the Creator” (297). One could thus say that Kundera’s notion of the idyllic is, strictly speaking, ‘prehumanist’ (or indeed ‘proto-posthumanist’) in the sense that “in Paradise man was not yet man” and “Adam was like Karenin”, which means that “the longing for Paradise is man’s longing not to be man” (296).

The gift of the idyll takes two forms, both of which are pictured in the novel: the individual and very special relationship between one admittedly privileged pet-animal and his or her ‘master(s)’; and the general ‘pastoral’ environment constituted by the proximity and presence of (domestic) animal*s* (Tereza’s function in the village is that of a cowherder). What is striking in the last moments of Karenin's existence is the reversal of responsibility between human and animal, between Tereza and 'her' dog. In their final, mutual interpellation what is evoked is not some kind of sentimentalising humanism of the animal destined to purify the grief of the human master, not so much the lacking 'response-ability' of the animal, but rather the opposite:

> She could not stand [Karenin's] stare; it almost frightened her. He did not look that way at Tomas, only at her. But never with such intensity. It was not a desperate look, or even sad. No, it was a look of awful, unbearable trust. The look was an eager question. All his life Karenin had waited for answers from Tereza, and he was letting her know (with more urgency than usual, however) that he was still ready to learn the truth from her. (Everything that came from Tereza was the truth. Even when she gave commands like 'Sit!' or 'Lie down!' he took them as truths to identify with, to give his life meaning.) (…) Tereza knew that no one ever again would look at her like that. (300)

Of course even here there is anthropocentrism at work, even a quasi-religious one. Karenin here occupies the subject position of the 'believer' in some higher but unknowable power, and Tereza is the equivalent of his 'goddess' his 'Subject' (or subject-supposed-to-know, in Lacanian terms). But it is nevertheless also a mutual interpellation process. Karenin is waiting for a reply, and the responsiveness of the animal knows no bounds – which strictly speaking almost places the animal into the position of a Levinasian subject. What the face-to-face encounter with 'her' dying animal emphasises is her own boundless responsibility and her ethical humanity. The scene also echoes earlier references to the Kantian categorical imperative: don't inflict upon others (humans or nonhumans) what you wouldn't want to endure yourself.

In Levinas's case, much discussed within posthumanist animal philosophy or 'zoophile theory', as one might call it, it is not Karenin who acts as the interpellating and interpellated animal, but Bobby, the dog whose presence for a few weeks seems to interrupt the violent and everyday dehumanising experience of the group of Jewish prisoners in Nazi Germany's camp number 1492. Treated as a "subhuman gang of apes" by the German guards, the Jewish prisoners are made to feel "entrapped in their species" (a 'reverse' speciesism, one could say) as "beings without language". "How can we deliver a message about our humanity which, from behind the bars of quotation marks, will come across as anything other than monkey talk?" Levinas asks.[401] This dehumanisation, this becoming animal, is briefly suspended by the arrival of Bobby, a stray dog, the friend of man, who has no doubts about the prisoners' humanity: "For him, there was no doubt that we were men".[402] This brief essay of not more than three pages has sparked a series of interventions in zoophile theory attempting to take issue with Levinas on the grounds that when he was thus confronted with a situation, an encounter, of what was undoubtedly an other, Levinasian 'practice', from an animal theory point of view, seems to fall short of what Levinasian ethics has been 'preaching' about unlimited responsibility and the face. The reason is that even though Bobby clearly affirms the humanism of the other human – Levinas goes so far as to call him "the last Kantian in Nazi

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[401] Levinas, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights", in: Callarco and Atterton, eds., *Animal Philosophy*, pp. 48-49.

[402] *Ibid*., p. 49.

Germany"[403] – Bobby remains 'a means to an end' and that the only face that counts for a truly ethical encounter is and remains, by definition, a human face. Even though "[o]ne cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal", as levinas admits, the 'priority' in an encounter with, for example, a dog, "is not found in the animal, but in the human face".[404] In other words, it is because *we* have access to *Dasein* (i.e. an ethical concern for being itself) and "know what suffering is" that *we* have an obligation to the animal's "vitality" – an "ethical obligation [that] extends to all living beings".[405] So while the 'prototype' of this is human ethics, we, *as* humans, have a responsibility towards the being of animals (even if this being is just a "struggle for life (…) without ethics"). Levinas's ethics thus remains radically humanist – it is indeed very similar to Kundera's – in the sense that through a questioning of the human by the other (human face), the singularity of a human being is constituted. Humanity is thus the condition for a responsibility not only for the other human (a responsibility which is without limit) but also for all living beings 'in' their animality:

> The aim of being is being itself. However, with the appearance of the human – and this is my entire philosophy – there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. That is unreasonable. Man is an unreasonable animal.[406]

It seems that, for Levinas, while our responsibility towards the nonhuman other is entirely reasonable – which can be seen in the centrality of the question of suffering, sentience and all kinds of other potentially 'measurable' or calculable criteria – our responsibility towards the human other or the other human is of an entirely different quality: mystical, sacred, divine. This could of course be interpreted as a confirmation of the abyss, the radical discontinuity between human and nonhuman (animal), a rejection of any naturalism that tries to make the human coextensive with (animal, evolutionary, vitalist, etc.) biology. Peter Atterton, in his commentary on Levinas's short essay on Bobby, for example, refers to this as Levinas's "ethical cynicism". Atterton deplores the fact that Levinas does not recognise the potential that his definition of ethical responsibility for the other could have for animal ethics. In his conclusion he therefore attempts to be more Levinasian than Levinas himself, so to speak:

> It seems to me that the lesson Levinas ought to have learned from Bobby was *not* that humans are like animals or animals are like humans, which would be to lack the sophistication required for a discussion of ethics that seeks to respect the absolute otherness of the Other. The lesson he should perhaps have learned was that his ethical theory was perhaps the best equipped of all theories – with the exception of utilitarianism – to accommodate the inclusion of the other animal, and thereby truly go beyond the very humanism – and human chauvinism – that has served as a philosophical justification for the mistreatment of animals for over two millennia.[407]

This passage, in my view, however, displays an extreme lack of generosity and patience *vis-à-vis* Levinas's argument. What Atterton here argues for, namely the inclusion of the animal other into Levinas's humanist ethics, would precisely invalidate the very possibility for a responsibility for both the human and the nonhuman other by taking away the necessary distinction that also guarantees both human and animal singularity. It is thus quite logical that Atterton seems to favour utilitarianism. Utilitarianism, however, is what is least on Levinas's mind.

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[403] *Ibid*.
[404] *Ibid*.
[405] *Ibid*., p. 50.
[406] *Ibid*.
[407] Peter Atterton, "Ethical Criticism," in: Callarco and Atterton, eds., *Animal Philosophy*,p. 61.

Atterton is not alone in his frustration with Levinas's supposed 'limitation', namely his apparent unfeeling blindness towards the most vulnerable of others – the animal. John Llewellyn asks whether Levinas's question – "Who is my neighbour?" – should not include the "nonhuman animal."[408] Peter Steeves also voices his disappointment that "the two E(I)mmanuels [Levinas and Kant] could never understand" that "[a]nimals do not merely perish".[409] David Clark is somewhat more circumspect. He starts with the observation that Levinas deliberately seems to bring into proximity – without, however, being tempted to establish a comparison between – "the sentimental humanization of animals and the brutal animalization of humans" and the two forms of violence associated with them, physical violence against "animalized Jews" and symbolic violence of the use of the animal as "a marker by which ferociously to abject the other", i.e. the "unspeakable human holocaust," and "the unspoken animal one".[410] There is acceptance of responsibility for both but no analogy between these for Levinas, because their confusion would in fact jeopardise responsibility for either, and thus any notion of Levinasian responsibility *tout court*. Bobby's interpellation – his recognising the prisoners as humans, and the prisoners', or indeed Levinas's, conscious anthropomorphisation of Bobby – brings forward a specific form of ethical affirmation, according to Clark: "Notwithstanding Levinas's desire to say 'no' to the animal, Bobby's face cannot entirely be refused, not because there is something residually 'human' or 'prehuman' about it, but precisely because of its nonhuman excess, because that face, screened though it is through Levinas's axiomatic discourse, constitutes a 'yes' that is not a 'yes', a 'yes' belonging uniquely to the animal, to *this* animal, and given freely to the human prisoners".[411] However, Clark's final verdict that Bobby is in fact merely a "domesticated creature", and as such already half human, is again too harsh. It implies that Bobby's role can be that of a scapegoat temporarily allowed into the camp to establish or maybe check and reconfirm the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman animal. In my view, there seems to be a compulsive and almost obscene desire in Levinas's critics to demonstrate that an ethics built on radical responsibility inscribed into the very core of human 'essence' perforce remains somehow 'uncharitable', despite or maybe even because all its good intentions. It suggests a desire to demonstrate that the humble appearance of this most humbling of ethics is somehow built on an unacknowledged and repressed hubris.

However, just as in reading Kundera's story about Karenin, what seems most compellingly ethical and responsible is, in fact, the process of an (admittedly sentimentally humanist) interpellation of the human by a nonhuman animal other which neither completely effaces nor confirms the difference between human and animal, but makes a responsibility for the singular nonhuman other possible. This view receives some endorsement in the work of the philosopher and ethologist Dominique Lestel.[412] Lestel criticises Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of 'becoming-animal' as too vague and instead explores the notion of 'human/animal hybrid communities', based not so much on mutual becomings but on co-habitation and mutual, but specific, forms of hospitality.[413] The true challenge for zoophile theory, according to Lestel, is the thinkability of "nonhuman individuality"[414] and the autonomy of a "(weak) animal subjectivity".[415] What he calls the "fourth injury to human narcissism" (after Copernicus, Darwin and Freud), lies in the recognition of animal subjectivity. Singular animal identity has to be accepted on the basis of animal-human interactivity and on what Lestel calls (as opposed to human identity relations based on the 'intimacy' of the self) the "extimacy" of human-animal relations:

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[408] John Llewelyn, "Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)," in: Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds., *Re-reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 234-245.

[409] H. Peter Steeves, "Lost Dog, or Levinas Faces the Animal", in *Figuring Animals: Essays on Animal Images in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and popular Culture*, eds. Mary Sanders Pollock and Catherine Rainwater (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005), 34.

[410] David Clark, "On Being 'The Last Kantian in Nazi Germany': Dwelling with Animals after Levinas", in: Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior, eds., *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 168-170.

[411] *Ibid*., p. 171.

> Animals are effectively subjects, some are even persons who possess an important autonomy, however, the most manifest subjects remain 'heteronomous', which means they need humans to acquire an important subjective dimension. (78)

Lestel's model is thus, in fact, one of co-domestication and mutual subjectification[416] and he therefore proposes an important shift in understanding our relation with animals (but also with what he calls 'the artifact', or the machine, the cyborg etc.), which he captures in a shift from "*humanité*" to "*humanitude*":

> Humanity [*humanité*] is a zoological category which refers to all humans; *humanitude* refers to the community of human potentialities, to this tremendous characteristic of the human to constitute a symbolic-zoological space whose limits can be explored and within which every particular human can engage in their singular ontological adventures according to trajectories that remain to be invented.[417]

Lestel's notion of "*humanitude*" does define a singular 'space' for humans but it is a category that is per definition also open and extendable to nonhuman animals.

Kundera's novel in many ways also acknowledges this. Apart from the singular animal and the individual human-animal interpellation (Tereza-Karenin), the novel also has an 'animal liberationist' dimension. Tereza, watching the cows and calves in her care, reflects on Genesis and domestication:

Of course, Genesis was written by a man, not a horse. There is no certainty that God actually did grant man dominion over other creatures. What seems more likely, in fact, is that man invented God to sanctify the dominion that he had usurped for himself over the cow and the horse. Yes, the right to kill a deer or a cow is the only thing all of mankind can agree upon, even during the bloodiest of wars. (*ULB* 286)

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[412] Cf. in particular his *L'Animal singulier* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

[413] Lestel, *L'Animal singulier*, 17ff.

[414] *Ibid*., p. 40.

[415] *Ibid*., p. 57.

[416] *Ibid*., p. 114.

[417] *Ibid*., pp. 123-124.

However, and this is where the categorical imperative is maybe joined by a kind of 'critical posthumanist' view: if a 'third party' entered this logic of dominion based on 'speciesism' and power, for example a 'visitor from another planet' who had been given the dominion by 'his God' over all other creatures in the universe: "all at once taking Genesis for granted becomes problematical. Perhaps man hitched to the cart of a Martian or roasted on the spit by inhabitants of the Milky Way will recall the veal cutlet he used to slice on his dinner plate and apologize (belatedly!) to the cow" (286). Man, as Tereza realises watching her cows play, "is as much a parasite on the cow as the tapeworm is on man: 'Man the cow parasite' is probably how non-man defines man in his zoology books" (287).

Tereza thus turns on Descartes who, by denying animals a soul and turning them into mere *machinae automatae*, began the long legitimation process of enlightened modernity that made man the master and proprietor of 'nature'. Philanthropy or misanthropy in this 'speciesist' context are not enough to make you a humanist (or antihumanist sceptic): "There is no particular merit in being nice to one's fellow man… We can never establish with certainty what part of our relations with others is the result of our emotions – love, antipathy, charity, or malice – and what part is predetermined by the constant power play among individuals" (289). And this is precisely where Kundera seems to reaffirm a profoundly transformed kind of humanism, certainly an 'ethical' but also an 'ecological', 'essentialist' but also '(ultra)liberal' one: "True human goodness, in all its purity and freedom, can come to the fore only when its recipient has no power. Mankind's true moral test, its fundamental test (which lies deeply buried from view), consists of its attitude towards those who are at its mercy: animals. And in this respect mankind has suffered a fundamental debacle, a debacle so fundamental that all others stem from it" (289). Cartesianism turns out to be nothing but a self-fulfilling prophesy. The way modernity has overlooked the moral test of the nonhuman and has repressed it behind processes of rationalisation and discourses of economism has indeed turned the increasingly removed, hidden and commodified nonhuman animals into nameless *machinae automatae*. Consequently Tereza seeks, through a move to the countryside, a return to Paradise, characterised by the proximity with (domestic) animals (296), when "man was not yet man" and where "Adam was like Karenin", unaware of his identity and self-reflection, unaware of disgust and the duality of body and soul (297).

As a consequence of this ethical resacralisation of life and the reinscription of the principle of humanity in the form of an absolute responsibility for animals and nature, Tereza of course does not fall back on the tradition of the Grand March by calling for 'animal rights', but instead realises and affirms her individuality, isolation and difference (287). Kundera's novel stresses the individual character of human responsibility and proposes a form of 'becoming-animal' very different from Deleuze's and Guattari's. To be fair, 'becoming' in Deleuze's and Guattari's sense has nothing to do with any kind of imitation, identification, evolution or mimesis either. It is not a becoming *like* x. It is pure desire and its effect is a 'mutual deterritorialisation' of two concepts. This is why 'becoming animal', for Deleuze and Guattari, "always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity".[418] They take the human need for the metaphorisation of the animal literally, namely as a desire for becoming animal as multiplicity, i.e. as a desire for the outside, in particular the 'outside' of (individual) identity. This desire is not to be confused with regression, however, but should rather be perceived as an 'involution', according to Deleuze and Guattari, who differentiate between three kinds of animals. The first is the individuated animal (i.e. the domestic pet, e.g. Karenin), who is "sentimental" and "Oedipal"; for Deleuze and Guattari these "narcissistic" animals are clearly not worth 'becoming'. Then there are animals with mythical characteristics, basically "animetaphors" (in Lippit's, and "*animots*", Derrida's sense). And finally, and most appealingly, there are "demonic animals, pack or affect animals that from a multiplicity, a becoming, a population, a tale."[419] In fact, Deleuze and Guattari, in describing becoming-animal in the form of a contagion and the creation of assemblages, are more in tune with Haraway's figure of the cyborg and the process of cyborgisation as hybridity or as a strategic contamination of the category of the human. However, their 'ethical' conclusions of this becoming are very different. While Haraway moves from the cyborg to the companion species and the dog in particular – that is, to the 'individual' animal – animality for Deleuze and Guattari is clearly a collective and it is in this collectivity that the attraction of becoming lies for them.

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[418] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "Becoming-Animal," in: Calarco and Atterton, eds., *Animal Philosophy*,p. 88.

It is interesting that in Kundera's novel these three forms of animal-human encounters, i.e. with the individual domestic animal and with the herd of cows, and Tereza's saving of the 'wild' animal, the crow, all seem to evoke the same kind of responsibility. However, they certainly do not constitute a 'becoming-animal' as such, since Deleuze and Guattari's ethical ideal is that of a 'symbiosis' of bodies in movement:

> To become animal is to participate in movements, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs.[420]

The Nietzschean nihilistic ethics that lurks behind this notion of becoming-animal betrays a combination of vitalism, naturalism and materialism. As James Urpeth, in his reading of Deleuze and Guattari, explains: "to undergo a desire-flow of the 'becoming-animal' variety is to be drawn back into a reality more fundamental than species and genera, organic classification, and evolution through filiation and descent".[421] Similarly, Rosi Braidotti envisages the posthuman as a 'nomadic subject' always in the process of becoming-other, e.g. through 'becoming-animal' as one form of becoming a deterritorialised network which she sees as an opportunity for a new ecological ethics based on the positive embracing of biodiversity and interspecies solidarity.[422]

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[419] *Ibid*., p. 90.

[420] *Ibid*., p. 96.

[421] James Urpeth, "Animal Becomings", in: Callarco and Atterton, eds., *Animal Philosophy*, p. 104.

[422] Cf. Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), chapter 3, and *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), chapter 3.

However, there is a danger in overestimating the subversive potential of this ‘becoming’, whether it relates to animal-becoming, to becoming-multiple, or, even more ‘radically’, to becoming ‘in-organic’, as Kate Soper points out:

> It is far from clear why the erosion of the organic and inorganic distinction should be thought of as offering any very pleasurable or liberating opportunities for individual self-realisation let alone provide a platform for a collective post-capitalist utopian agenda.[423]

The idea of ‘becoming-animal’ in Kundera’s novel has indeed very different connotations. In Tereza’s last dream she associates Tomas’s execution with a transformation into a rabbit and realises that what she had always thought of as being her weakness was in fact the power behind their lives’ transformation. In becoming-rabbit Tomas had lost all his strength. He had gradually given up all his “*es muss seins*”, his women, his profession, his ‘mission’ and finally his youth: “She had reached her goal: she had always wanted him to be old. Again she thought of the rabbit she had pressed to her face in her childhood room. What does it mean to turn into a rabbit? It means losing all strength. It means that one is no stronger than the other anymore” (313). For Tereza, becoming animal is embracing one’s vulnerability, one’s responsibility towards the other, whereas Deleuze’s and Guattari’s becoming-animal seems quite the opposite. It is arguably the Nietzschean vitalism that demands a loss of self, but implies a regaining of force through the ‘multitude’ in return, that I find problematic here. While Tereza’s and Kundera’s radical humanism stresses the individuality of responsibility, Deleuze and Guattari’s antihumanism is deliberately ‘irresponsible’. I would argue that this basically constitutes a political and ethical choice for different ‘posthumanisms’ in relation to the nonhuman other more generally: a singular and predominantly ethical responsibility that humans face *vis-à-vis* the nonhuman, on the one hand, and a predominantly political project of becoming other-than-human by embracing (in the hope of undermining) the current (neoliberal, technoscientific, global capitalist…) conditions of posthumanisation.

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[423] Kate Soper, “Humans, Animals, Machines”, p. 107.

9 "Not that I am afraid of becoming an animal" – Ecography in Marlen Haushofer's *The Wall*

> That wouldn't be too bad, but a human being can never become just an animal; he plunges beyond, into the abyss.[424]

Our time is framed by human-induced climate change, the return of war to Europe with another reminder of the persistent threat of nuclear annihilation. Under these circumstances, a re-reading of Marlen Haushofer's novel, *The Wall*, first published in 1963, and mostly ignored until the 1980s, seems almost to impose itself. It was first translated into English in 1990, but it was the 2012 film adaptation[425] which allowed it to reach a wider and more international audience, who were subsequently quick to recognise the prescience of its (post)apocalyptic, (post)human and (post)ecological scenario.[426] In other words, *The Wall* deserves a place in the emerging canon of contemporary "Anthropocene fiction".[427]

Julian Pösler's "Afterword" to the reissued 2012 edition of the English translation whose dust jacket now bears a still from Pösler's movie with the tagline "Now a major motion picture", is quite representative in this new kind of appreciation the novel has been receiving:

> *The Wall* is one of the greatest texts ever written in German-language literature and, for that matter, in any language. (…) I do feel (…) that the novel and the film based upon Haushofer's masterwork gets at something of the human condition that no other work of fiction does – the truth of yourself when you are the last remaining member of the human race. *The Wall* is a novel [that has been described as] the precise embodiment of clinical depression.[428]

Indeed, if there is one feeling the reader of Marlen Haushofer's work is left with at the end of *The Wall* it is that of disillusionment. It is somewhat surprising that a female author should have been so utterly disarming in her bleak description of a time and a humanity that had just survived one of the worst human-made catastrophes. Marlen Haushofer belonged to a generation of pre-1968 women who were still brought up ‘traditionally’, often disenchanted by marriage and family life, and by men, but who did not yet have the ‘revolutionary’ inclination of the generation that followed. Instead, Haushofer as so many other women in her social situation continued to suffer in silence growing more detached from the world, while clearly seeing how society was going to the dogs. Maybe the most devastating aspect of this disillusionment and the bleakness it spreads throughout Haushofer’s fiction is the absence of any trace of cynicism. Haushofer is almost brutal in her merciless earnestness and hopelessness. Hers is an abysmal sadness without redemption, a melancholia without any longing, only a completely helpless and gradual abandoning of self and world in the face of inescapable violence, suffering, death and insignificance. Reading her is depressing but one is hooked because despite everything one senses that she is not devoid of care, on the contrary. It is depressing precisely because Haushofer’s female protagonists (and some male ones as well) still seem to care about everything, life’s everyday details, ‘nature’ and, above all, nonhuman animals. In a way, *The Wall*’s protagonist is a female version of Camus’s Sisyphus, just without any remaining absurdist heroism, existentialism without hope.

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[424] Marlen Haushofer, *The Wall*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Berkeley: Cleis Press, 1990), p. 34 (further references will be given in the text. The German original is: "Nicht dass ich fürchtete, ein Tier zu werden, das wäre nicht sehr schlimm, aber ein Mensch kann niemals ein Tier werden, er stürzt am Tier vorüber in einen Abgrund" (Marlen Haushofer, *Die Wand* [1962] (Frankfurt: Ullstein 1987), p. 44). Further references to this edition will be given in the text.

[425] *Die Wand*, dir. Julian Pölsler (Vienna and Berlin: Studiocanal, 2012).

[426] Alyssa Howards points out that in her teaching experience COVID-19 as well "has given the novel renewed relevance" due to its "narrator's frontier-style life", cf. Howards, "A Cold War Text for the COVID Generation", *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German* 56 (2023): 14-16.

[427] Cf. Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

[428] Julian Pösler, "Afterword", in *TheWall*, pp. 247-248. Sabine Frost is less kind to both film and novel in her "Looking Behind Walls: Literary and Filmic Imaginations of Nature, Humanity, and the Anthropocene in *Die Wand*", in: Sabine Wilke and Japhet Johnstone, eds, *Readings in the Anthropocene: The Environmental Humanities, German Studies, and Beyond* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 62-88. Of the film, Frost says that it "romanticizes the relationship between humanity and nature" (p. 62) and of the novel's protagonist she thinks that "the woman sacrifices her individual existence for the care of the remaining animals. She regards this stewardship as altruistic and selfless, but she actually re-enacts humanity's oppressive attitude towards nature" (p. 67). In my reading I am hoping to show that at least the second of Frost's judgements is very uncharitable indeed.

With hindsight therefore, the parameters of the current reception of the film and the novel seem clearly defined: on the one hand, the gender issue it raised when it first appeared remains very relevant, as the feminist movement of the 1980s was quick to recognise and focus on, given the existential isolation of the anonymous female narrator as the only survivor after the violent self-destruction of patriarchal civilisation (the novel has been frequently classified as a “female Robinsonade”). On the other hand, the pacifist interpretation of the anti-nuclear and ecologist movement of the 1980s obviously read Haushofer’s survival scenario as that of a post-nuclear war and as a ‘world without us’ utopia. There is no question that both dynamics are legitimate and still very pertinent, however, both angles tend to focus on the *human* question of survival in the face of a catastrophe that seems to have ‘petrified’ *all* life beyond the mysterious wall in Haushofer’s fiction. They tend to remain fundamentally *humanist* in their mainly anthropocentrically motivated readings, even though in very different ways: readings of *The Wall* as a ‘female Robinsonade’ and as an example of *écriture féminine* tend to stress the prospect of (human) survival and foreground the question of a new beginning for a ‘better’ civilisation (i.e. beyond patriarchy and predominantly male violence). They ask the question of what will become of ‘us’ (humans) after the end of civilisation as we know it? Not only the feminist movement, but also the pacifist one is therefore concerned with a disruption and a new beginning. Both are focused on what one might call the idea of ‘rescue’ and its logic, and both are thus ‘ecological’ in a still very limited, namely anthropocentric, sense.

It is precisely here, in my opinion, that a much more radical and critically *post*humanist reading of *The Wall* is required. It is indeed questionable whether Haushofer’s novel is (still) about any ‘logic of rescue’. The protagonist is at best divided about returning to or rebuilding human civilisation. In this sense, it is questionable whether *The Wall* is (still) a humanist or an anthropocentric story, for the narrator is equally divided about the impending loss of her own humanity. It might even be no longer a story about humans at all, not even in the anthropomorphic sense of an animal fable. Instead, Haushofer’s novel seems to anticipate a postanthropocentric worldview that has been gaining momentum since the beginning of the 21st century, one that is no longer based on humanist ethical and ecological values.

Haushofer's novel, as I would argue, thus moves along a line of flight, from an *écriture féminine* to what one might refer to as an *écriture animale*, and possibly even beyond, namely to an *écriture écologique* (or an 'ecography' as I am proposing to call it). In doing so, *The Wall* is also already raising the question of what role fiction is to play in a posthumanist context, and in the process of 'de-anthropocentring' it advocates.[429]

From écriture féminine *to* écriture animale *to...*

Marlen Haushofer emphasised that it was the writing process itself that was the central concern of her work and literary criticism has duly tended to present her as a 'writerly' writer from the beginning. It is no coincidence that a central writerly motif of one of her novels, *Eine Handvoll Leben* [*A Handful of Life*], became the title of one of the most comprehensive collections of essays in German on Haushofer's work to date: "Perhaps a very distant eye could unravel a secret writing from this splintered work".[430] In *The Wall* the protagonist-narrator-writer sees writing as an indispensable form of recording her experience and to remind herself of her own humanness. It thus serves as a kind of human 'self-assurance', even though ultimately it also is becoming a meaningless cultural technique given her existential isolation as the (presumably) only survivor, as a writer without a reader. Writing therefore inevitably plays a structurally ambivalent role for the narrative. Writing is an existential technique for the narrator because it serves as a protective device against 'madness', as she explains: "I'm not writing for the sheer joy of writing; so many things have happened to me that I must write if I am not to lose my reason" (1).[431] However, the writing process in *The Wall* is in fact a very complex one. It is both a mere recording (a 'report') and a safeguarding through remembering; it is so to speak a double writing, or writing and its double. "All I have to rely on is a few meagre jottings; meagre, because I never expected to write this report" (1), as the narrator confesses. As a result, she fears that "much that I remember will be different from my real experiences"

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[429] The original version of this chapter was written 2013 and appeared in German as "'Nicht daß ich fürchtete, ein Tier zu werden…' Ökographie in Marlen Haushofers *Die Wand*", *Figurationen* 15.1 (2014): 41-55. It thus predates recent readings which see *The Wall* as a forerunner to current Anthropocene fiction like Frost's, cited above, or also Anna Richards's "'The Friendship of Our Distant Relations': Feminism and Animal Families in Marlen Haushofer's *Die Wand* (1963)", *Feminist German Studies* 36.2 (2020): 75-100. I quote Richards, however, because of our shared focus on the role of animals in the novel, and because of the elegant and concise plot summary she provides:

> Appearing in 1963, before the increase in public awareness of animal abuse, Marlen Haushofer's *Die Wand* (*The Wall*, 1991) is extraordinary in its portrayal of animals as valuable individuals in their own right, rather than simply as creatures existing for human benefit. The novel consists of the first-person account of a woman who wakes up one morning in a hunting lodge in the Austrian Alps to find that, nearby, an invisible wall has descended and the people and animals on the other side are dead. Apparently the only human survivor, the narrator develops close, mutually dependent relationships with a dog, a cat, a cow, and their offspring. While blaming humanity, and in particular men, for creating a loveless, technologically oriented society responsible for its own demise, the narrator attributes largely positive qualities to these animals and loves them like a family. (Richards, p. 76)

[430] Marlen Haushofer, *Eine Handvoll Leben* [1955] (München: DTV, 1991), p. 156. Cf. Anke Bosse and Clemes Ruthner, eds., *"Eine geheime Schrift aus diesem Splitterwerk enträtseln…" – Marlen Haushofers Werk im Kontext* (Tübingen: Francke, 2000).

[431] "Ich schreibe nicht aus Freude am Schreiben; es hat sich eben so für mich ergeben, daß ich schreiben muß, wenn ich nicht den Verstand verlieren will" (*Die Wand*, 7).

(1).[432] Her report and her notes are separated from each other both temporally and ontologically. The sparse notes were not written with the intention of later completing a full report. There were in fact periods when the narrator did not take any notes at all. The report, i.e. *The Wall*, like any report inevitably can only come into being *post factum*, after everything has already happened and time has literally stopped: "I don't know what time it is exactly. Probably around three in the afternoon. I've lost my watch" (2).[433] In addition, the annual ascent to the mountain pasture (*Alm*) is accompanied by a profound transformation of the narrator into a 'stranger' living in a state of 'timelessness' outside of writing, as she explains: "I probably didn't make many entries about this because it all struck me as a little unreal. The *Alm* lay outside of time" (158).[434]

The narrator meticulously describes her writing technique at the beginning of her report: "I have a ball-point pen and three pencils. The ball-point pen is almost dry, and I very much dislike writing in pencil. My writing doesn't stand out as clearly against the paper. The delicate grey strokes blur into the yellowish background. But I have no choice, after all. I'm writing on the backs of old diaries and yellowed business paper" (2).[435] This fading and blurred writing of the last surviving human is the only thing that seems to delay the loss of (human) reason and memory. The limited resource of paper also determines the length of the report, the end of which coincides with the last page of the old 'business papers' and 'calendars' she found: "Today, the twenty-fifth of February, I shall end my report. There isn't a single sheet of paper left" (244).[436] "When winter came in November, I decided to write this report. It was my last resort. I couldn't spend the whole winter sitting at the table with that one question in my head, a question that no human being, nobody at all in the world, can answer" (243).[437]

The question that ultimately motivates her writing is the question about humans, who they are and why they do what they do. However, it is also the classical philosophical 'question of the animal': "I don't understand what happened. Even today I wonder why the strange man killed Bull and Lynx" (243).[438] At the end of the report, after the all-motivating question has been asked, the narrator describes her state of mind in the following words: "Now I am quite calm. I can see a little further ahead. I can see that this isn't the end. Everything goes on. (…)

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[432] "Ich bin angewiesen auf spärliche Notizen; spärlich, weil ich ja nie damit rechnete, diesen Bericht zu schreiben, und ich fürchte, daß sich in meiner Erinnerung vieles anders ausnimmt, als ich es wirklich erlebte" (7).

[433] "Ich weiß nicht genau, wie spät es ist. Wahrscheinlich gegen drei Uhr nachmittags. Meine Uhr ist verloren-gegangen" (8).

[434] "Wahrscheinlich machte ich auch keine Aufzeichnungen darüber, weil mir alles ein wenig unwirklich erschien. Die Alm lag außerhalb der Zeit" (182).

[435] "Ich besitze einen Kugelschreiber und drei Bleistifte. Der Kugelschreiber ist fast ausgetrocknet, und mit Bleistift schreibe ich sehr ungern. Das Geschriebene hebt sich nicht deutlich vom Papier ab. Die zarten grauen Striche verschwimmen auf dem gelblichen Grund. Aber ich habe ja keine Wahl. Ich schreibe auf der Rückseite alter Kalender und auf vergilbtem Geschäftspapier" (8).

[436] "Heute, am fünfundzwanzigsten Februar, beende ich meinen Bericht. Es ist kein Blatt Papier übriggeblieben" (276).

[437] "Als im November der Winter hereinbrach, beschloß ich, diesen Bericht zu schreiben. Es war ein letzter Versuch. Ich konnte nicht den ganzen Winter am Tisch sitzen mit dieser einen Frage im Kopf, die mir kein Mensch, überhaupt niemand auf der Welt, beantworten kann" (275).

[438] Ich verstehe nicht, was geschehen ist. Noch heute frage ich mich, warum der fremde Mann Stier und Luchs getötet hat" (275).

something new is coming, and I can't escape that" (243).[439] This is not to be misread as a sign of a confidence gained. It merely constitutes some reprieve of remembering, which will make room for something new and will make sure she won't lose her humanness, even though she is very much aware that this will only bring some temporary relief. Writing is therefore to be understood as a kind of human 'therapy', as therapeutic for the narrator's humanity. This is explained in more detail in a reflection on why the *Alm* is no place for writing, but only for pure 'sensuality':

> In my memory, that summer is overshadowed by events that occurred much later. I can no longer feel how beautiful it was, now I only know it was. There is a terrible difference. That's why I can't draw the picture of the pasture. My senses have a worse memory than my mind, and one day they may stop remembering entirely. Before that happens I must have written everything down. (187)[440]

An incredibly complex logic seems to underlie this train of thought: two kinds of memory are here distinguished, that of the senses and that of the mind; one is purely affective and based on 'feeling', the other is rational and based on 'knowing'. Affective memory, like Lynx's sniffing, is superior to purely rational (human) memory, which is only secondary. Significantly, and somewhat paradoxically, writing, of all things, is intended to stop the narrator's dreaded fading of affect, perhaps even to capture the sensuality of the Alpine pasture and make it accessible to her once again. It is as if writing for the narrator could outwit the brain and undermine its dominance. In a quite literal sense, the recording process in *The Wall* is about a 'report of experience', a 'sensual writing'. It is an entirely different writing that seems to sit between rational remembering and sensual forgetting (cf. "My thoughts almost always raced ahead of my eyes and distorted the true picture" (185)).[441]

As Marlen Haushofer's narrator recognises, being possibly the last representative of the human species and gradually shedding her female, human face, she also has to familiarise herself with the feeling that her writing will no longer find any human reader. So why keep on writing, one might ask. This question in fact has a concrete effect in terms of the fictitious addressee of the report. The narrator must take into account its future reader's possible 'non-humanity' and thus has to legitimate her writing as a no longer (exclusively) human act: "Over the last few days I have realized that I still hope [a human being] will read my report" (70; translation modified).[442] In return, the story also demands from its actual (human) reader an attitude that suspends the human/nonhuman distinction that is usually always tacitly presupposed in any narrative. *The Wall* is thus less, or at least not only, an early example of *écriture féminine*, but instead the invention of an *écriture animale*.

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[439] "Jetzt bin ich ganz ruhig. Ich sehe ein kleines Stück weiter. Ich sehe, daß dies noch nicht das Ende ist. Alles geht weiter. (…) aber etwas Neues kommt heran, und ich kann mich ihm nicht entziehen" (275).

[440] "In der Erinnerung ist der Sommer überschattet von Ereignissen, die viel später eintraten. Ich spüre nicht mehr, wie schön es war, ich weiß es nur noch. Das ist ein schrecklicher Unterschied. Deshalb gelingt es mir nicht, das Bild der Alm zu zeichnen. Meine Sinne erinnern sich schlechter als mein Hirn, und eines Tages werden sie vielleicht ganz aufhören, sich zu erinnern. Ehe dies eintritt, muß ich alles niedergeschrieben haben" (213).

[441] "Fast immer waren die Gedanken schneller als die Augen und verfälschten das wahre Bild" (210).

[442] "Seit einigen Tagen ist mir klar geworden, daß ich immer noch hoffe, ein Mensch werde diesen Bericht lesen" (84).

The first sign of this can be found in the narrator-protagonist's awareness of this shift in perspective is when she realises that she in her observation process she is also being watched by her animals: "I'm hurt, but who knows, maybe the cat knows me better than I know myself, and knows what I could be capable of. As I write, she's lying in front of me on the table, staring with her big yellow eyes over my shoulder at a patch of the wall" (40).[443] The idea of 'animal writing' becomes increasingly literal and material over the course of the report, as the narrator becomes aware that she is no longer necessarily writing to leave some human legacy:

> But mice will eat the report long before that. (…) They probably like eating paper with writing on just as much as blank sheets. (...) It's a strange feeling, writing for mice. Sometimes I simply have to imagine I'm writing for people, which is a bit easier. (70-71)[444]

The idea of a 'mouse writing' – writing with, by and for mice (in a literal sense, i.e. with the certainty that the writing is both for no one but rodents by whom it will most likely be eaten).

Apart from this radically literal understanding of 'animal writing', the actual tracks or traces animals leave also play a central role in the remembering process of the narrator's post-apocalyptic survival scenario, with its literally postanthropocentric environment. The memory trace, which, as Jacques Derrida showed, in general has to be thought 'beyond' or outside any distinction between human and nonhuman writing.[445] This explains the ambivalent role tracing and writing play in *The Wall*. Animal and human traces here merge into a form of meaningful inscription as a result of a new human-animal relationship that actually form the narrator's memory:

> I'm not surprised that I still hear the dry branches cracking under the light tread of his feet. Where else would his little dog's soul go haunting, if not on my trail? He's a friendly ghost, and I'm not afraid of him. Lynx, beautiful, good dog, my dog, it's probably just my poor head making the sound of your footsteps, the gleam of your coat. As long as I exist you'll follow my trail, hungry and yearning, as I myself, hungry and yearning, follow invisible trails. Neither of us will ever bring our prey to ground. (100).[446]

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[443] "Es kränkt mich, aber wer weiß, vielleicht kennt die Katze mich besser, als ich selbst mich kenne, und ahnt, wozu ich fähig sein könnte. Während ich dies schreibe, liegt sie vor mir auf dem Tisch und sieht aus großen gelben Augen über meine Schulter auf einen Fleck der Wand" (50).

[444] "Viel eher aber werden die Mäuse den Bericht fressen. (…) Wahrscheinlich fressen sie beschriebenes Papier genauso gern wie unbeschriebenes. (…) Es ist ein merkwürdiges Gefühl, für Mäuse zu schreiben. Manchmal muß ich mir einfach vorstellen, ich schriebe für Menschen, es fällt mir dann ein wenig leichter" (84-85).

[445] Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967] (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 9ff.

[446] "Es wundert mich nicht, daß ich noch immer die dürren Äste hinter mir knistern höre unter dem leichten Tritt seiner Sohlen. Woanders sollte seine kleine Hundeseele spuken als auf meiner Spur? Es ist ein freundlicher Spuk, und ich fürchte ihn nicht. Luchs, schöner, braver Hund, mein Hund, Wahrscheinlich macht nur mein armer Kopf das Geräusch deiner Tritte, den Schimmer deines Fells. Solange es mich gibt, wirst du meine Spur verfolgen, hungrig und sehnsüchtig, wie ich selbst hungrig und sehnsüchtig unsichtbare Spuren verfolge. Wir werden beide unser Wild nie stellen" (116-117).

Of course, it would be easy to pick up on the melancholic tone of this passage, which is still profoundly humanist (because anthropocentric) and 'moving' (for humans, presumably). It is also marked by the narrator's self-pity. And certainly its great appeal lies in the very sober and 'tragic' note that runs throughout the report. However, such a reading, in my view, would be too one-sided and unfair. It would not be generous enough, because it would overlook the fact that in the narrator's memory the distinction between human and animal traces is truly erased. The narrator's anthropocentrism is directly challenged by herself in the following passage, which alludes to the 'otherness' and 'indecipherability' of what would be an entirely different, posthuman and posthumanist writing:

> The only creature in the forest that can really do right or wrong is me. And I alone can show mercy. Sometimes I wish that burden of decision-making didn't lie with me. But I am a human being, and I can only think and act like a human being. Only death will free me from that. Whenever I think 'winter', I always see the white, frost-covered fox standing by the snow-covered stream. A lonely adult animal going his predetermined way. Then it seems that this image means something important to me, as if it is only a sign for something else, but I can't get to the meaning of it. (109-110)[447]

This clearly resonates with Derrida's idea that an extraordinary responsibility arises from the special position of humans, which even a radically postanthropocentric and posthumanist world view will find difficult to deny.[448] It is the narrator's central insight that it is precisely this responsibility which also constitutes the unsurpassable limitation of human understanding. It gestures towards the animal (which I am/that I follow [*que je suis*]) and which I can only represent and 'think' as an (animal) 'sign' [*animot*], and which stands in for something completely other whose meaning eludes me *qua* human being.

This does not in any way constitute or sanction a separation from the animal 'in' me, or from the animal that I *am* or that I am compelled to *follow* [*l'animal que donc je suis*]. On the contrary, the narrator's animal writing is also to be understood as 'writing as an animal'. In writing, the narrator becomes one with her animals, whom she follows and tracks (in her writing). For example, in her 'absurd' but irrepressible hope of a return to human civilisation she compares herself to a blind mole:

> And yet I still nurture an insane hope. I can only smile upon it indulgently. With the same stubborn independence, as a child I had hoped that I should never have to die. I see this

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[447] "Das einzige Wesen im Wald, das wirklich recht oder unrecht tun kann, bin ich. Und nur ich kann Gnade üben. Manchmal wünsche ich mir, diese Last der Entscheidung liege nicht auf mir. Aber ich bin ein Mensch, und ich kann nur denken und handeln wie ein Mensch. Davon wird mich erst der Tod befreien. Wenn ich ‚Winter' denke, sehe ich immer den weiß-bereiften Fuchs am verschneiten Back stehen. Ein einsames, erwachsenes Tier, das seinen vorgezeichneten Weg geht. Es ist mir dann, als bedeute dieses Bild etwas Wichtiges für mich, als stehe es nur als Zeichen für etwas anderes, aber ich kann seinen Sinn nicht erkennen" (128).

[448] See e.g. Derrida's "'Eating Well', or the Calculation of the Subject, An Interview with Jacques Derrida", in: Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy eds, *Who Comes Afte the Subject?* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 111ff.

> hope like a blind mole, crouched within me, brooding over his delusion. As I can't drive him from me, I have to endure him. (63)[449]

It is in fact this very mole, one might argue, that does the writing when the narrator describes her ('humanimal') drive to record her experience – the animal that she pursues in her writing and whom she thus literally, trustingly and blindly follows around. The most astonishing aspect in fact is the fundamental undecidability in this connection between human and animal writing. There is the animal that 'writes in me' and the animal that I 'become' through writing, as the narrator reveals in the central 'dream passage', in which she describes her animal 'family':

> In my dreams I bring children into the world, and they aren't only human children; there are cats among them, dogs, calves, bears and quite peculiar furry creatures. But they emerge from me, and there is nothing about them that could frighten or repel me. It only looks off-putting when I write it down, in human writing and human words. Perhaps I should draw these dreams with pebbles on green moss, or scratch them in the snow with a stick. But I can't yet do that. I probably won't live long enough to be so transformed. Perhaps a genius could do it, but I'm only a simple person who has lost her world and is on the way to finding a new one. This way is a painful one, and still far from over. (207-208)[450]

This limitation of human writing in the narrator's process of 'becoming animal' (cf. her reference to an ongoing transformation, above) goes even further than evoking the need for an 'animal writing'. In fact, it points both back and forward to a time of radical proto- *and* postanthropocentric forms of 'writing', namely a writing with pebbles or snow and sticks. I will briefly return to this notion of an 'ecological' or environmental writing, or 'ecography', as one might call it, towards the end of this chapter. First, however, I would like to establish more generally to what extent the narrator's views fit into a contemporary understanding of postanthropocentric and posthumanist writing.

Surviving – Postapocalypse, Ecocide and Postanthropocentric Writing

Posthumanism should not be equated with some more or less naive cyborgisation fantasies. The effect of the prefix 'post-' is rather to be understood in a deconstructive vein. Such a

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[449] "Und doch sitzt in mir noch immer eine wahnsinnige Hoffnung. Ich kann nur nachsichtig darüber lächeln. Mit diesem verstockten Eigensinn habe ich als Kind gehofft, nie sterben zu müssen. Ich stellte mir diese Hoffnung als einen blinden Maulwurf vor, der in mir hockt und über seinen Wahn brütet. Da ich ihn nicht aus mir vertreiben kann, muß ich ihn gewähren lassen" (76)

[450] "Im Traum bringe ich Kinder zur Welt, und es sind nicht nur Menschenkinder, es gibt unter ihnen Katzen, Hunde, Kälber, Bären und ganz fremdartige pelzige Geschöpfe. Aber alle brechen sie aus mir hervor, und es ist nichts an ihnen, was mich erschrecken oder abstoßen könnte. Es sieht nur befremdend aus, wenn ich es niederschreibe, in Menschenschrift und Menschenworten. Vielleicht müßte ich diese Träume mit Kieselsteinen auf grünes Moos zeichnen oder mit einem Stock in den Schnee ritzen. Aber das ist mir noch nicht möglich. Wahrscheinlich werde ich nicht lange genug leben, um so weit verwandelt zu sein. Vielleicht könnte es ein Genie, aber ich bin nur ein einfacher Mensch, der seine Welt verloren hat und auf dem Weg ist, eine neue Welt zu finden. Dieser Weg ist schmerzlich und noch lange nicht zu Ende" (235).

‘critical posthumanism’[451] is in fact a working through of ‘our’ humanist values and reflexes. Hence also the proximity of posthumanism to current postanthropocentric and ecological thinking. Contrary to the projected desires and anxieties of a traditional commonsense humanist-anthropocentric view of the human that so-called *trans*humanists believe they can achieve through technological enhancement, critical posthumanism is in fact resisting such an idea of a ‘new man’. Instead it understands the human as a being that has fundamentally misunderstood and overestimated itself, and as a result has repressed its true responsibilities. The survival scenario in Haushofer’s story falls into the period of the Cold War with its of threat of nuclear self-destruction (cf. “At the time everyone was talking about nuclear wars and their consequences…” (3)),[452] from which the female protagonist and sole human survivor miraculously escapes thanks to the wall. The nuclear threat today has of course not disappeared, in fact the nuclear self-destruction of humanity remains evidently possible; however, over the last decades the fear of ecocide has become more and more concrete given the growing scientific evidence of human-induced climate change and the ongoing dramatic loss of biodiversity. If the unspecified weapon and its life-suspending effects on the other side of the glass wall in Haushofer’s novel resemble those of a nuclear strike or a neutron bomb, in today’s catastrophic imaginary it most likely evokes some species-threatening ecocatastrophe caused by humans now living in the ‘Anthropocene’, under the conditions of self-inflicted global warming. Or indeed, it might be the effect of some genetically or biotechnologically induced act of destruction, a new kind of biological warfare, maybe a virus infinitely more deadly than COVID-19.

Haushofer’s proto-posthumanist affinity with our present, in the early 21st century, lies precisely in its fictional examination of the ecological and postanthropocentric effects of a postapocalyptic survival scenario after such an extinction event like a global ecocide. Haushofer’s story is fascinating because it neither accuses nor warns, but rather tries to think humanness in a ruthlessly postcivilisational environment. However, it does so without any illusion, unsparingly, but also without cynicism or giving in to nihilism. The resulting emotional detachment and sobriety is part of the reader’s fascination with the protagonist’s description of her situation. It is also closely linked to the responsibility the narrator feels, as a sole survivor, to tell the truth about humanity: “I can allow myself to write the truth; all the people for whom I have lied throughout my life are dead” (31).[453]

The damning judgment the narrator casts in her criticism of human civilisation is weighed up against the new postanthropocentric, posthumanist and (post)ecological situation of her nonhuman ‘family’ in the following passage:

> Things happen, and, like millions of people before me, I look for meaning in them because my vanity will not allow me to admit that the whole meaning of an event lies in the event itself. If I casually stand on a beetle, it will not see this event, tragic for the beetle, as a mysterious concatenation of universal significance. (…) But we are condemned to chase after a meaning that cannot exist. (…) I pity animals, and I pity people, because they’re thrown into this life without being consulted. Maybe people are

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[451] Cf. Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* [2009] (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[452] “Damals war immer die Rede von Atomkriegen und ihren Folgen…” (10).

[453] “Ich kann mir erlauben, die Wahrheit zu schreiben; alle, denen zuliebe ich mein Leben lang gelogen habe, sind tot” (40).

> more deserving of pity, because they have just enough intelligence to resist the natural course of things. It has made them wicked and desperate, and not very lovable. All the same, life could have been lived differently. There is no impulse more rational than love. It makes life more bearable for the lover and the loved one. (...) I can't understand why we had to take the wrong path. I only know it's too late. (209-210)[454]

The subdued, existentialist and tragic tone of this passage and the almost Nietzschean criticism of human narcissism (see also 193/220) remain of course themselves traces of a 'residual' humanism, but they are recognised as such by the narrator as indelible, as an attempt to legitimate the special position human animals take despite or maybe because of their utterly deplorable 'nature': "Pity was the only form of love for human beings that remained for me" (201).[455] However, out of this pity also arises a special responsibility (towards others, be they human, nonhuman or the environment), and the narrator obviously tries to appeal to all of these with her desperate call to reason and love.

It is not that the narrator denies her own humanity, nor is she afraid of becoming an animal, as the title-epigraph states. Nevertheless, the 'deanthropocentering' process *The Wall* describes can be said to follow a logic of 'strategic' misanthropy,[456] and is designed to prevent the narrator from falling into the 'abyss' that, unbridgeably, separates humans from nonhuman animals and instead threatens to turn humans into something even 'worse' than animals. As seen, the protagonist's misanthropy is fired by the question of why the 'strange man' killed her animals, which, is the actual motivation for writing her report. Nevertheless, it is also from this questioning that her ultimately life-affirming and ethical-ecological attitude also emerges: "Yet there is no escape, for as long as there is something for me to love in the forest, I shall love it; and if some day there is nothing, I shall stop living" (140).[457]

The narrator attempts to push the limits of her own 'deanthropocentring' as far as possible by trying to live entirely without (human or humanist) illusions and to thereby to fit into her new ecological situation ("the great game of the sun, moon and stars" (184/209)): "It was better to think not about human beings [literally: to think away from, or outside humans]. The great game of the sun, moon and stars seemed to be working out and that hadn't been invented by humans" (184).[458] "To think away from humans" means to think of oneself as posthumanist, perhaps even as posthuman, if that was possible. In doing so, the protagonist exposes herself to what she sees as the greatest danger, namely the abyss of some suicidal 'inhumanity': "I had got as far from myself as it is possible for a human being, and I realized that this state couldn't last if I wanted to stay alive" (184).[459]

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[454] "Die Dinge geschehen eben, und ich suche, wie Millionen Menschen vor mir, in ihnen einen Sinn, weil meine Eitelkeit nicht gestatten will, zuzugeben, daß der ganze Sinn eines Geschehnisses in ihm selbst liegt. Kein Käfer, den ich achtlos zertrete, wird in diesem, für ihn traurigen Ereignis einen geheimnisvollen Zusammenhang von universeller Bedeutung sehen. (…) Nur wir sind dazu verurteilt, einer Bedeutung nachzujagen, die es nicht geben kann. (…) Ich bedaure die Tiere, und ich bedaure die Menschen, weil sie ungefragt in dieses Leben geworfen werden. Vielleicht sind die Menschen bedauernswerter, denn sie besitzen genausoviel Verstand, um sich gegen den natürlichen Ablauf der Dinge zu wehren. Das hat sie böse und verzweifelt werden lassen und wenig liebenswert. Dabei wäre es möglich gewesen, anders zu leben. Es gibt keine vernünftigere Regung als Liebe. Sie macht dem Liebenden und dem Geliebten das Leben erträglicher. (…) Ich kann nicht verstehen, warum wir den falschen Weg einschlagen mußten. Ich weiß nur, daß es zu spät ist" (238).

[455] "Mitleid war die einzige Form der Liebe, die mir für Menschen geblieben war" (228).

[456] On the notion of 'strategic misanthropy' see Daniel Cottom, *Uncommon Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), pp. 148ff.

[457] "Es gibt keinen Ausweg, denn solange es im Wald ein Geschöpf gibt, das ich lieben könnte, werde ich es tun; und wenn es einmal wirklich nichts mehr gibt, werde ich aufhören zu leben" (161-162).

Towards the end of the story, the protagonist comments on her namelessness by writing: "It occurs to me that I haven't written down my name. I had almost forgotten it, and that's how it's going to stay. No one calls me by that name, so it no longer exists" (35).[460] However, the danger of a complete 'dehumanisation' her deanthropocentring process might lead to remains. "The only enemy I had ever encountered in my life so far had been man" (15),[461] the narrator explains while focusing on protecting her new animal family by way of compensation, because "as long as [humans] got the people they hadn't given a thought to the animals in the course of their slaughter" (32).[462] In this sense, dehumanisation understood merely as a form of '(re)animalisation' of the only surviving human would not only not be enough; it would actually be a catastrophe, or falling into the abyss of inhumanity:

> I don't know why I do that [i.e. writing], it's as if I'm driven by an inner compulsion. Maybe I'm afraid that if I could do otherwise I would gradually cease to be a human being, and would soon be creeping about, dirty and stinking, emitting incomprehensible noises. Not that I'm afraid of becoming an animal. That wouldn't be too bad, but a human being can become just an animal; he plunges beyond into the abyss. (34)[463]

The protagonist is therefore, so to speak, condemned to remain human and to protect her humanness, if not her humanity, from the Heideggerian 'abyss of being' as one might say.[464] For the narrator, the transformation into some inhuman 'creature' – an inhuman human, who would not even be worthy of a nonhuman animal – would essentially be an insult both to animals and humans. Because, as with Heidegger, the meaning of human being in *The Wall* lies in a kind of pastoral attitude towards being.[465] It is a responsibility not primarily towards humans as such, but very much a human responsibility towards nonhuman others more generally: “My mind is free, it can do what it likes, but it mustn’t lose its reason, the reason that will keep me and the animals alive” (53).[466] It is in fact the intimate living with ‘her’ animals, whose existence she follows and shares, that requires her to remain human, and which require her to keep her human capacity of ‘reasoning’ intact. However, remaining human in this sense no longer derives from a special hierarchical position, but from a pure, yet ultimately inexplicable, responsibility: “The cat and I we were made of the same stuff, and we were in the same boat, drifting with all living things towards the great dark rapids. As a human being, I alone had the honour of recognizing this, without being able to do anything about it. A dubious gift on the part of nature, if I thought about it” (176-177).[467]

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[458] "Es war besser von den Menschen wegzudenken. Das große Sonne-, Mond- und Sterne-Spiel schien gelungen zu sein, es war auch nicht von Menschen erfunden worden" (209-10).

[459] "Ich hatte mich so weit von mir entfernt, wie es einem Menschen möglich ist, und ich wußte, daß dieser Zustand nicht anhalten durfte, wenn ich am Leben bleiben wollte" (210).

[460] "Es fällt mir auf, daß ich meinen Namen nicht niedergeschrieben habe. Ich hatte ihn schon fast vergessen, und dabei soll es auch bleiben. Niemand nennt mich mit diesem Namen, also gibt es ihn nicht mehr" (44-45).

[461] "Der einzige Feind, den ich in meinem bisherigen Leben gekannt hatte, war der Mensch gewesen" (23).

[462] "Solange es Menschen gab, hatten sie bei ihren gegenseitigen Schlächtereien nicht auf die Tiere Rücksicht genommen" (41).

[463] "Ich weiß nicht, warum ich das tue, es ist fast ein innerer Zwang, der mich dazu treibt. Vielleicht fürchte ich, wenn ich anders könnte, würde ich langsam aufhören, ein Mensch zu sein, und würde bald schmutzig und stinkend umherkriechen und unverständliche Laute ausstoßen. Nicht dass ich fürchtete, ein Tier zu werden, das wäre nicht sehr schlimm, aber ein Mensch kann niemals ein Tier werden, er stürzt am Tier vorüber in einen Abgrund" (44).

[464] On Heidegger's notion see Mark A. Wrathall's entry on "Abyss", in: Wrathall, ed., *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 9-11.

[465] Cf. "Man is the shepherd of Being", Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism", in: *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1977), p. 234.

In passages like these, however, it also becomes clear that, for Haushofer, as opposed to Heidegger, it is not about advancing an idea of supposed ‘world poverty’ in animals so that one might legitimate humans’ special status as that of ‘guardians of being’.[468] Haushofer’s emphasis is closer to Derrida’s thinking (who follows Jeremy Bentham) which stresses the ‘compassionate’ bond of a natural ‘sympathy’ between humans and animals and their ability to suffer: “The barriers between animal and human come down very easily. We belong to a single great family, and if we are lonely and unhappy we gladly accept the friendship of our distant relations. They suffer as we do if pain is inflicted on them, and like myself they need food, warmth and a little tenderness” (207).[469]

Nevertheless, the narrator is wary of idealising nature: “Nature sometimes struck me as one great trap for its creatures” (212).[470] Nor are animals ‘better people’, as they may occasionally be stylised in some contemporary fictional or indeed also nonfictional postanthropocentric scenarios. The episode of the white crow might serve as an example in this respect. “Strangeness and badness are still one and the same thing for me. And I see that not even animals are free of this idea” (222).[471] The narrator records her own ambiguous reaction towards this albino crow (“a miserable absurdity that shouldn’t exist” (222));[472] “[i]t can’t know why it’s been ostracized; that’s the only life it knows. It will always be an outcast and so alone that it’s less afraid of people than its back brethren” (222). Still, she cannot help but also find the white bird beautiful. For the narrator, the dubious ‘privilege’ of humans lies, perhaps, right here: “But I want the white crow to live, and sometimes I dream that there’s another one in the forest and that they will find each other” (222).[473] It is therefore certainly no coincidence, and this undoubtedly further contributes to the tragic and ‘residual’ humanism of the story, that the last scene of the novel is dedicated to the survival of the white crow: “The crows have risen, and are circling screeching over the forest. When they are out of sight I shall go to the clearing and feed the white crow. It will already be waiting for me” (244).[474]

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[466] “Mein Kopf ist frei, er darf treiben, was er will, nur die Vernunft darf ihn nicht verlassen, die Vernunft, die er braucht, um mich und die Tiere am Leben zu erhalten” (65).

[467] “Die Katze und ich, wir waren aus dem selben Stoff gemacht, und wir saßen im gleichen Boot, das mit allem, was da lebte, auf die großen dunklen Fälle zutrieb. Als Mensch hatte ich nur die Ehre, dies zu erkennen, ohne etwas dagegen unternehmen zu können. Ein zweifelhaftes Geschenk der Natur, wenn ich es recht überlege” (201-2).

[468] On the animal’s ‘poverty in world’ see Martin Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1983), pp. 273ff.

[469] “Die Schranken zwischen Tier und Mensch fallen sehr leicht. Wir sind von einer einzigen großen Familie, und wenn wir einsam und unglücklich sind, nehmen wir auch die Freundschaft unserer entfernten Vettern gern entgegen. Sie leiden wie ich, wenn ihnen Schmerz zugefügt wird, und wie ich brauchen sie Nahrung, Wärme und ein bißchen Zärtlichkeit” (235).

[470] “Die Natur schien mir manchmal eine einzige große Falle für ihre Geschöpfe” (240).

[471] “Fremd und böse sind für mich immer noch dasselbe. Und ich sehe, dass nicht einmal die Tiere davon frei sind” (251).

[472] “Sie kann nicht wissen, warum sie ausgestoßen ist, sie kennt kein anderes Leben. Immer wird sie ausgestoßen sein und so allein, daß sie den Menschen weniger fürchtet als ihre eigenen schwarzen Brüder” (252).

This almost tender image of feeding the crow is in stark contrast to the previous ‘murder scene’, in which the protagonist shoots the strange (and probably last) man. She does so, unjustifiably, at least from a humanist-anthropocentric (and obviously even more so from a patriarchal) point of view, because he (‘merely’) killed her bull and her dog. The narrator readily admits: “I was glad he was dead; it would have been hard for me to kill an injured person. And yet I couldn’t have left him alive” (241).[475] It is precisely this apparent cold-bloodedness, this inexplicable and ‘unnatural’ detachment from her own species identity, the lack of empathy towards her own species, or as one might say her radical ‘antispeciesism’, which seems to scare the narrator herself, as she realises that it goes against her innermost human reflexes. But perhaps this is the price that she needs to pay so that she can acquire a new, a posthumanist view of humanity that should not lead into the abyss of inhumanity. At least that is how one might read the following passage, in which the protagonist, anticipating Donna Haraway’s famous “Cyborg Manifesto” by two decades,[476] sets out to challenge the boundary between humans and machines and that between humans and animals at the same time:

> I don’t know whether I will be able to bear living with reality alone. Sometimes I try to treat myself like a robot (...). But it only works for a short time. I’m a bad robot; I’m still a human being who thinks and feels, and I shall not be able to shake either habit. (186)[477]

And just Haraway a few decades after her first manifesto, the narrator of *The Wall* realises that she has “gone to the dogs” in her post-civilisational and also post-technological world.[478]

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[473] “Ich will, daß die weiße Krähe lebt, und manchmal träume ich davon, daß es im Wald noch eine zweite gibt und die beiden einander finden werden” (252).

[474] “Die Krähen haben sich erhoben und kreisen schreiend über den Wald. Wenn sie nicht mehr zu sehen sind, werde ich auf die Lichtung gehen und die weiße Krähe füttern. Sie wartet schon auf mich” (276).

[475] “Ich war froh, daß er tot war; es wäre mir schwergefallen, einen verletzten Menschen töten zu müssen. Und am Leben hätte ich ihn doch nicht lassen können” (273).

[476] Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century [1985]”, in: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-182.

[477] “Ich weiß nicht, ob ich es ertragen werde, nur noch mit der Wirklichkeit zu leben. Manchmal versuche ich mit mir umzugehen, wie mit einem Roboter [...] Aber es geht nur kurze Zeit. Ich bin ein schlechter Roboter, immer noch ein Mensch, der denkt und fühlt, und werde mir beides nicht abgewöhnen können” (211-12).

[478] Cf. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003); see also Manuela Rossini, “To the dogs: Companion speciesism and the new feminist materialism”, *Kritikos* 3 (2006); available online at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254870797_To_the_Dogs_Companion_speciesism_and_the_new_feminist_materialism (accessed 09/01/2024).

The full ambiguity of her (post)human existence is thus reflected in her relationship to her companion species:

> With Lynx nearby I could never stay sad for long. It was almost shaming that being with me made him so happy. I don't think that grown animals living wild are happy or even content. Living with people must have awoken this capacity in the dog. I'd like to know why we have this narcotic effect on dogs. Perhaps man's megalomania comes from the dogs. Sometimes even I imagined there must be something special about me that made Lynx almost keel over with joy at the sight of me. Of course there was never anything special about me; Lynx was, like all dogs, simply addicted to people. (99)[479]

The symbiotic human-dog 'ecotope' that largely replaces (human) civilisation in this story is based on a mutual, drug-like interdependence. For the narrator, Lynx is her "sixth sense", without which she feels like an "amputee" (129). His quasi-human status is emphasised more and more as the story progresses: "Sometimes I imagined that Lynx had suddenly grown hands, would soon have started thinking and talking as well" (118).[480] Finally, shortly before the final 'catastrophe', at the end of the report, any distinction between human and dog is entirely abolished: "That summer I quite [literally: completely] forgot that Lynx was a dog and I was a human being. I knew it, but it had lost any distinctive meaning. (…) Now, at last, there was a silent understanding between us" (234).[481] The magnitude of the loss for the protagonist caused by Lynx's death can only be understood in this postanthropocentric context. The narrator loses her only human-like companion. His uniqueness is just as irreversibly lost as that of the other (male) human. Lynx, we must believe, was the sole survivor of his own species, possibly the last dog-companion on the planet. It is this irreparable loss that outweighs the extinction of her own species which also explains the contrast in the way the narrator treats the bodies of the dead strange man and that of her dead dog – one of the aspects which most shocked Haushofer's readers at the time. She unceremoniously throws the man over a cliff and gives Lynx a dignified burial.

The Posthumanist and 'Ecographical' Future of Fiction

It was not my intention in this posthumanist reading of *The Wall* to merely show that literature has the fictional power to anticipate 'our' postanthropocentric moment, or to make it real by imagining it. The interest of such a reading, instead, lies more in adding to the growing human self-consciousness of and sensitivity for 'our' ability to follow human, animal or other traces before they might be entirely blurred. If one accepts to engage with the kind of impossible thought experiment of a posthumanist and postanthropocentric writing *The Wall* invites its readers to pursue, one will also have to recognise that Haushofer's story can be a strong ally for the necessary construction of new ecologies, politics and ethics that will serve to further push, and perhaps one day dissolve, the boundaries inherent in the still very much prevalent canon of humanist and anthropocentric values. What is particularly precious in this context is the fact that *The Wall* speculates on a posthumanism 'without' (or 'after') technology, so to speak;[482] a posthumanism of ecological deceleration: "It's only since I've slowed down that the forest around me has come to life" (194).[483]

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[479] "Ich konnte neben Luchs nie lange traurig bleiben. Es war fast beschämend, daß es ihn so glücklich machte, mit mir zusammen zu sein. Ich glaube nicht, daß wildlebende erwachsene Tiere glücklich oder fröhlich sind. Das Zusammenleben mit dem Menschen muß im Hund diese Fähigkeit geweckt haben. Ich möchte wissen, warum wir auf Hunde wie ein Rauschgift wirken. Vielleicht verdankt der Mensch seinen Größenwahn dem Hund. Sogar ich bildete mir manchmal ein, es müßte an mir etwas Besonderes sein, wenn Luchs sich bei meinem Anblick vor Freude fast überschlug. Natürlich war nie etwas Besonderes an mir, Luchs war, wie alle Hunde einfach menschensüchtig" (116-17).

[480] "Manchmal bildete ich mir ein, daß Luchs, wären ihm plötzlich Hände gewachsen, bald auch zu denken und zu reden angefangen hätte" (137).; on the connection between the hand, thinking and the human see Derrida, "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand", in: John Sallis, ed., *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989)pp. 161-196.

[481] "In jenem Sommer vergaß ich ganz, daß Luchs ein Hund war und ich ein Mensch. Ich wußte es, aber es hatte jede trennende Bedeutung verloren. (…) Jetzt endlich herrschte zwischen uns ein stillschweigendes Verstehen" (265).

The other, perhaps even more important, insight, however, lies in the incredible difficulty the surpassing of her humanist-anthropocentric self-image the (last) human being encounters, and who again and again falls victim to some residual, 'tragic' humanism, even after she has seemingly reached the endpoint of her self-doubt, at the end of a long and almost clinical process of self-examination or unlearning. Not that the narrator ever had any doubts about the limitations of her humanist education (70); nevertheless, a an irresistible desire remains in her that is both unattainable and suspect, suspect perhaps precisely because it remains unattainable, that is, some nostalgic "feeling of having suffered a terrible loss" (202), of a humanity, a humanist legacy and its undeniable cultural achievements.

The secret of this desire undoubtedly informs the (human) self-identification process as such. Even in the denial of one's humanity, even in the experience of a radical deanthropocentring in an extreme survival situation, in the act of writing as well as in the act of reading, an identification with nonhuman others must obviously and necessarily remain a mere metaphor, an inescapable anthropomorphism. Nevertheless, a speculation, a fictional 'leap', is the only way to critically address the posthumanising and deanthropocentring tendencies 'our' present. In this sense, 'we', just like the narrator, know that one day we are going to have to deal with *The Wall* as an event, and we might follow her in saying – and I am fully aware that I am here condemned to repeat the residual humanism inherent in any (human) reading process: "[t]he wall has become so much a part of my life that often I don't think about it for weeks. The wall forced me to make an entirely new life, but the things that really move me are still the same as before: birth, death, the seasons, growth and decay. The wall is a thing that is neither dead nor alive, it really doesn't concern me, and that's why I don't dream of it. One day I will have to reckon with it, because I won't be able to live here forever…" (129-130).[484] Just like the narrator, then, the last surviving human, we will not be able to continue living 'here' or 'like this' forever, maybe not even much longer, because from a planetary point of view, again just like the narrator, "even now [we are] nothing but a thin skin covering a mountain of memories. I don’t want to go on. What will happen to me if that skin gets torn?” (54).[485]

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[482] Cf. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "Critical Posthumanism, or, the *Inventio* of a Posthumanism Without Technology", *Subject Matters* 3.2/4.1 (2007): 15-29.

[483] "Seit ich langsamer geworden bin, ist der Wald um mich erst lebendig geworden" (221).

[484] "Die Wand ist so sehr ein Teil meines Lebens geworden, daß ich oft wochenlang nicht an sie denke. (…) Die Wand ist ein Ding, das weder tot noch lebendig ist, sie geht mich in Wahrheit nichts an, und deshalb träume ich nicht von ihr. Eines Tages werde ich mich mit ihr befassen müssen, weil ich nicht immer hier werde leben können…" (150).

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[485] “Ich bin schon jetzt nur noch eine dünne Haut über einem Berg von Erinnerungen. Ich mag nicht mehr. Was soll denn mit mir geschehen, wenn diese Haut reißt?” (66).

Section III – Life-Writing

10 Narrating(-)Life

'Narrating life'[486] – this phrase warrants some investigation. Who is the 'agency' or the 'subject' in this phrase, 'narrating' or 'life'? Who, or what, is narrating life? Which would mean that life was an object (or being subjected to narration), as if life was 'in need of' narrating in order to become what it 'is'. Or, instead, might life be the narrator or the narrating instance: life that expresses itself through narration? In both cases, life 'as such' would be something 'outside' narration (while being in need of it) but, as such, it would remain invisible (at least for the (human?) observer). However insistent the questioning, life would not be able to yield its secrets 'outside' or 'without' narration. But life would always be ventriloquised by some (human?) narrator – unless, by some magical process of inscription, life was to do the narrating and writing 'itself' (which would presuppose a 'self', or at least some 'sense of self', self-reflexivity and thus consciousness, or at least iterability, in the Derridean sense – life it*self*).

There is, another way of reading the phrase – narrating life – life that is narrated. Following this third avenue, one might wish to hyphenate the two components: narrating-life. One might argue that this would be quite a surprising but also not entirely foolish definition of *literature*. The 'author' (Roland Barthes's 'scriptor') would have a narrating-life (and, presumably, a non-narrating one besides). The text would show or open up the possibility of a narrating-life (as well as a 'narrated-life'). In so far as a text is some form of 'writing' or 'inscription', narrating-life would be quasi-synonymous with it.

Without discarding any of these, what all these possibilities provide for is an immense expansion of the meaning of life writing. Narrating life – understood either as the writer's task or as the curious agency acquired by life to tell its own stories – raises the question of who: who does the narrating? Who is the subject of so-called 'life writing'? Life writing – a form of writing formerly known as 'autobiography' – is a literary but maybe also non-literary, scientific, ecological genre. To what extent could life-writing be understood as that special kind of genre and practice that may offer a privileged site (or a 'laboratory') for imagining and 'emploting' life, or ways of narrating life? Would life express itself *necessarily* through writing or 'fiction'? And, the reverse, is there any fiction that would not be somehow about life, or at least *a* life? All the difference of course lies in the indefinite article: a life or life (or indeed Life, as some transcentendal entity or principle). That's life! Nobody would say: that's *a* life, or maybe only in the sense: here goes another life… i.e. another death. Life as this enigmatic life force, the animation of the inanimate, the divine spark, or spirit, this *je-ne-sais-quoi* that transforms dead 'matter' into, what exactly? Whereas a life, 'my' life, this countable (countable to a degree that it is always unique – this life, mine, the only one I have, but which of course is not really 'mine' at all, strictly speaking), finite, irreversible, 'tragic' and laughable period of time that I must narrate to myself to make it mine, this little life, this fallen life of a demiurge, is the proper subject of autobiography. Life, the one with a capital 'L', the cyclic, always evolving and (self)transforming, 'energetic' principle or force, on the other hand, would call for life writing (or even life-writing or, ultimately, lifewriting – one word).

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[486] Some parts of this essay have also appeared in Stefan Herbrechter, "Posthumanism, Subjectivity, Autobiography", *Subjectivity* 5.3 (2012): 327-47.

The relationship between fiction or literature and life is an age-old theme: what happens to life, what happens to 'my' life, while I am narrating it? Is the 'I' who does the narrating (regardless in which person 'I' am narrating my story, it is always an 'I' that is being told) the same 'I' as the one that is narrated? The gap between 'I' and 'I', in fact, that is where life, the real one, the living one, must be taking place. Narrating and living, in fact, mutually exclude each other it would seem. While I am writing I am living elsewhere, or my 'body' at least is living 'elsewhere'. Literature – auto-bio-graphy, life writing – would not only be a substitute for life, or a lesser (or, indeed, higher) form of life – it would positively exclude living 'as such', if living were to be understood as 'being at one with oneself', 'mere' being, even less than *Dasein* (being-there). Might this be the special appeal but maybe also the deep mistrust or even hatred ('at least since Plato') that literature, fiction, poetry have sometimes inspired? That fact that literature 'lives off' life, that it parasites, replaces, virtualises life 'itself' might be a waste of time if not life. Literature *or* life (as Jorge Semprun so aptly and provocatively put it.[487]

Semprun's question – *l'écriture ou la vie?* – arises out of a context in which life was at its most precarious, life at its 'barest', or where bioplitics turned into 'zoopolitics', namely the 'death camp'. Zoopolitics and zoography – since Giorgio Agamben revived the ancient Greek distinction between bios and zoē – are concepts that deeply affect the notion of life writing. What life is being narrated, or which of the two lives does the narrating – bios or zoē? One would assume that something conscious like an autobiography would be based on bios, or life-as-it-makes-sense-to-a-me. 'I' am the 'subject' of (or maybe to?) 'my' life, which is of course based on a social process of negotiation with others (people, institutions, objects, environments etc.). Life writing in this sense is inextricable from 'biopolitics' because it is in itself an (auto- and hetero-)biopolitical act. Zoography is an entirely different matter. No 'I' can write its own zoography since the inscription process on life, a life, is always done at a level that goes beyond and remains below individual and traditional forms of agency. The life of zoē writes and 'narrates' itself (through 'my' body). It is also a form of narrating life, but one that no longer distinguishes between human and nonhuman, object and subject, world and thing. It also goes beyond (or remains 'below', or indeed 'before') any biopolitics, because of its purely processual and distributive, disseminal and transformative logic. The full meaning of the phrase 'narrating life', arises out of the difference and the interaction between bios and zoē and asks, more specifically of literature – that discourse most 'in tune' with narrativisation, one might say – how its imagination might affect and be affected by the emergence of a critical awareness of bio- and zoopolitics. Under the conditions of the global appropriation and strife over 'life' (as material, commodity, transcendental signified and signifier) how to carry on narrating? Under the conditions of a generalised biopolitics, what historical and contemporary mutations of literature, what strategies of immunity, mutation, and contagion of textual and critical practices do writers of fiction, literature, drama or poetry foreground in order to address and maybe even produce the future and/or the survival of literature or fiction and thus the narrating of 'life'?

Narrating life thus understood challenges all forms of writing, but literature in particular. It forces a return to writing as a 'bio-logical' act. It is organic, biopic, literally – if that were possible. Narrating as a bio-(logical, political, semiotic) act can only be thought in the terms of mutation, contagion and immunity. In focusing on new forms of life writing, e.g. posthuman

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[487] Jorge Semprun, *Literature or Life* (New York: Viking, 1997).

(auto-)biographies, (science) fictional accounts of (alien) life forms and their transmutations, narratives and subjectivities without, after, or before humans, and practical contagions between real and fictional, literary and scientific, human and nonhuman discourse and the resistance to these – their specific (auto and hetero)immunisations. What kind of allergic reactions does narrating life produce today? What are the symptoms it provokes?

Subject to (a) Life

> I am developing (…) a sustainable brand of nomadic ethics. The starting point is the relentless generative force of bios and zoē and the specific brand of transspecies egalitarianism that they establish with the human. The ecological dimension of philosophical nomadism consequently becomes manifest and, with it, its potential ethical impact. It is a matter of forces as well as ethology (…). The vital politics of life as zoē, defined as a generative force, resets the terms of the debate and introduces an ecophilosophy of belonging that includes both species equality and posthumanist ethics.[488]

To explore some of these questions the phrase 'narrating life' raises in the current ('posthumanist' if not 'posthuman') context, I am first returning to the genre of auto-bio-graphy. All three ingredients of auto-bio-graphy are becoming increasingly unstable: autoaffection, the historicity and materiality of 'life', and the agency and subjectivity of writing. Affect studies, posthumanist theories of materialism, and deconstruction and new media theory have all been contributing to and commenting on this development. Within the history of *auto-bio-graphy* as a genre or mode of narrating the 'story of a life' the most recent shift has been the move outlined above: from (auto)biography to life writing. Life, in turn, has become the main focus of current theories located between the (post)humanities, new media and the (life) sciences. It therefore seems appropriate to explore the fallout of these changes under this heading: i.e. 'life writing'. It is no coincidence that this is happening at a time when the effects of contemporary biopolitics are being discussed ever more urgently and controversially.

In the context of contemporary literary criticism on life writing Gillian Whitlock raises the stakes by joining together the autobiographical and the human: "what it means to be human is a question that is fundamental to autobiographical narrative, and embedded in the history of autobiography in western modernity".[489] As soon as one narrates the life of the 'human' (i.e. no longer in the sense of a self-evident 'liberal humanist individual subject') from the constructed vantage point of a no-longer-quite-human form of narration or narrator, one enters posthumanist territory and one begins narrating 'posthuman' lives, as Sidonie Smith explains:

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[488] Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of Life as *Bios/Zoē",* in: Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke, eds., *Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), p. 183.

[489] Gillian Whitlock, "Post-ing Lives", *Biography* 35.1 (2012): v.

> As the posthuman gets a life, it will be fascinating to observe and engage adaptations of narrative lives routed through an imaginary of surfaces, networks, assemblages, prosthetics, and avatars.[490]

The posthumanisation of life writing raises an infinity of questions. However what these questions share is the fact that they are all questions of life and death.

Life writing and autobiography – always a popular genre – have been raising renewed critical interest, and the 'autobiographical' – always at the heart of theory, especially deconstruction – has been thoroughly problematised. All its constituents, in fact, auto-bio-graphy, especially in a posthumanist context, have developed a life of their own, so to speak. The automatism of the prefix 'auto-', rather than simply shoring up some form of self-identity – a self writing itself – has turned against its self. The reflective narcissism that underlies any form of identity has been problematised by two very different 'autos': autoaffection and autoimmunity.

The 'bio' in auto*bio*graphy, under the condition of generalised biopolitics in the late 20th and early 21st century referred to above has rendered the obvious materiality (or matter-reality) of life more precarious and more fleeting. It is becoming increasingly problematic to say: 'this is "my" life'. Instead, the Deleuzian (post-vitalist) impact has turned life into pure 'immanence'; and it has transformed it into a precarious 'haecceity'.

Likewise, the suffix '-graphy' has shifted from designating a mere recording or inscription process – because of the 'decentring' of the subject *of* writing – towards an idea of writing whose agency is not that of a conscious or unconscious individual ego but has acquired a much more 'distributed' agency.

This ongoing 'deconstruction of auto-bio-graphy' is an undoing of the humanist foundations of self-identity. The very idea of autobiography relies on a subject (or a narrator) who is capable of remembering, interpreting and identifying with his or her (or 'its'?) life story. It is a very specific form of embodiment that usually conveys trust in the impression that the subject of the narration is identical to the subject of the narrative. This is, in fact, what guarantees self-sameness, i.e. an assurance that 'I' *am* 'me'. Many complications trouble this model of autobiographical consciousness, usually referred to as 'Cartesian': there are, first of all, the earlier blows against this self-conscious 'I' from the figures referred to earlier (whose work is sometimes grouped under the term 'hermeneutics of suspicion'). Nietzsche critiques the objectivity and the truth of the subject through his notion of the 'will to power'. Freud's main claim is that the ego is not the master in its own house, i.e. the autobiographical 'I' cannot be trusted with its own story because it is partly written by other, namely unconscious, forces, under the influence of protective mechanisms, censorship and unconscious desires. Marx adds the idea that a subject is subject to ideologies and therefore not fully aware of its implication in larger political schemes, i.e. one could adapt Marx's famous dictum and say: humans write their (autobiographical) stories but not under the conditions of their own making. Darwin, of course, detects another logic at work in human undertakings. There are at least two versions of autobiography in every human subject – the *individual* biography and the autobiography of the *species*, which stand in a kind of dialogue with each other and which are largely determined by biology, genetics and evolution. Poststructuralism further radicalises these forms of suspicion, all directed against the idea that subjects are free and competent to give an accurate account of themselves, by problematising a number of aspects, many of them related to the specific understanding of language (as based on Saussurean linguistics, namely that language is an abstract and culturally constructed system of differences). Lacan rereads Freud in terms of linguistics and differentiates within each subject between an imaginary (narcissistic), symbolic (social) and real (unconscious) order. The conscious subject, for Lacan, is based on a double misrecognition – a narcissistic misrecognition with an idealised other and a social misrecognition based on an equally narcissistic illusion of mastering language. Both identity and language, however, come from an other, which means that the subject is identified and spoken rather than being in control of his or her auto- (or, as a result, rather, auto-hetero-) biography.

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[490] Sidonie Smith, "Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries", *PMLA* 126.3 (2011): 571.

Althusser brings together Lacanian psychoanalysis, a Marxist understanding of ideology and aspects of (Saussure's and Benveniste's) linguistics. For him, the subject is fundamentally an addressing device, a pronoun shifter that allows to connect between a 'you' with a 'me/I/we', and to switch between these, through the mechanism of hailing. It is because subjects can be subjected to an address (by other subjects) that they can become subjects in the first place. A subject is therefore first and foremost a position or positioning, or a vulnerability in terms of lacking awareness about the very fact of being positioned (hence the ideological misrecognition of the liberal humanist subject being interpellated as 'free'). The necessary but unacceptable position of the subject of autobiography would lie in the fact that 'I' write about my 'self' as the 'free' subject of my own (life) narrative, or 'I' 'am' the main character in 'my' 'own' life story.

Foucault adds to this an analysis of the larger discursive power structures that work as much at a 'micro', or, individual, level, as on a larger, societal, or 'macro', level. Instead of oppression, modern societies rely on self-disciplining through processes of bio-politics, subjectivity and embodiment. A subject for Foucault is a subject of (i.e. both exercising and receiving) power who adapts to socio-political pressures by working on 'it(s) self'. An autobiography in the Foucauldian sense can therefore only be the inscription of biopolitics into a narrative by a more or less empowered self as subject.

Both Levinas and Derrida stress another aporia at the heart of the subject and therefore of autobiography. There is a temporal and spatial delusion at work in the idea of a subject's self-presence. The subject is the effect of an 'Other' (who, in Levinas's theological model, is ultimately God, as experienced in the face of another human; in Derrida, this other is an unknowable, who or that has the structure of a trace or of '*différance*' – a 'non-present' presence that can never be made present as such because it is always deferred and thus always differs from itself, like a trace). This other always precedes and gives rise to the subject's impression of self-presence and identity – an identity which is, in fact, always merely an identity that comes to 'me' from an 'earlier' but 'unknowable' 'Other.

In order to show the implications of this deconstruction of the autobiographical it is helpful to return to Paul de Man's notion of autobiography as 'defacement'. The deconstruction of autobiography, as usual, begins with a raising of the stakes or the generalisation of the autobiographical genre:

> [autobiography] (…) is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject. This specular structure is interiorized in a text in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding, but this merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be *by* someone and assumed to be understandable to the extent that this is the case. Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical.[491]

As de Man continues: "The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions".[492]

The key figure of the autobiographical genre is prosopopeia [*prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*)], which is "the trope of autobiography, by which one's name (...) is made as intelligible and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration".[493] As de Man explains:

> As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding. Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause.[494]

The masked subjectivity of autobiography thus significantly challenges the autoaffective desire that underlies the autobiographical urge.

A further complication is then provided by Derrida through the notion of auto-hetero-bio-graphy:

> Autobiography, the writing of the self as living, the trace of the living for itself, being for itself, the auto-affection or auto-infection as memory or archive of the living would be an immunizing movement (...), but an immunizing movement that is always threatened with becoming auto-immunizing, as is every autos, every ipseity, every automatic, automobile, autonomous, autoreferential movement. Nothing risks becoming more

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[491] Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement", *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 70.

[492] *Ibid*., p. 71.

[493] *Ibid*., p. 76.

[494] *Ibid*., pp. 80-81.

> poisonous than an autobiography, poisonous for itself in the first place, auto-infectious for the presumed signatory who is so auto-affected.[495]

Furthermore, the ‘poisonous’ nature of auto(hetero)biography is exacerbated by the fact that, like any text or writing, inscription comes at the price of iterability. Not only do ‘I’ write ‘my’ autobiography (literally or metaphorically) as if I were an ‘other’ but I also, in writing it, I am doing so ‘as if I were dead’, hence Derrida’s additional twist: autobiography is in fact ‘auto-hetero-*thanato*-graphy’:

> But what does it mean to be dead, when you are not totally dead? It means that you look at things the way they are as such, you look at the object as such. To perceive the object as such implies that you perceive the object as it is or as it is supposed to be when you are not there... So, to relate to an object as such means to relate to it as if you were dead. That’s the condition of truth, the condition of perception, the condition of objectivity, at least in their most conventional sense. (18) (…) What is absolutely scary is the idea of being dead while being quasi-dead, while looking at things from above, from beyond. But at the same time, it is the most reassuring hope we have that, although dead, we will continue to look, to listen to everything, to observe what’s going on. (20) (…) I think it is bearable only because of the as if: ‘as if I were dead’. But the as if, the fiction, the quasi-, these are what protect us from the real event of death itself, if such a thing exists.[496]

If every autobiography is written from the autoaffective point of view ‘as if I were dead’ the shift towards life writing might itself be seen as an ‘autoimmunitarian’ reaction in the context of generalised biopolitics.

Following the biopolitical shift from autobiography or life writing to a posthumanist notion in which the (grammatical) subject or agent of the phrase can no longer clearly be disentangled from its object opens up the possibility for all kinds of postanthropocentric forms of life writing to emerge. In fact, the very ‘bios’ in autobiography – as proposed above – dissolves and generalises at the same time.

The autobiographic genre thus ‘faces’ further pro*life*ration and fragmentation as a result of a posthumanist and postanthropocentric ecology. Every component of the term ‘auto-bio-graphy’ is being challenged afresh by posthumanism: to briefly recapitulate, the *auto-* in *auto*biography is seen as an instance of auto-affection, which relies on an inappropriable (inhuman) other. The *bio-* in auto*bio*graphy is exposed to the challenge as to what constitutes the *bio*logical element in every narration of a ‘life’; finally, the question of writing in autobio*graphy* is being raised again with more urgency by new forms and media of inscription. It is, for example, worth remembering that the Derridean notion of the trace was from the start never restricted to any human logic of writing, or to forms of inscription exclusively effectuated by human subjects.[497] Under these conditions, it is no surprise that as the forms of subjectivity proliferate the genre of autobiography becomes more and more fragmented and subdivided into *autofiction*, life writing, memoir, *autobio(s)copie*, etc.[498]

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[495] Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”, *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002): 415)

[496] Jacques Derrida, *“*As if *I were dead” – An Interview with Jacques Derrida* [1995] (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2000), p. 22.

The autobiographical genre is the embodiment of the aporia of subjectivity: who is the addressee of one's autobiography? Derrida explains the conundrum at the heart of the autobiographical by, first of all, insisting on the problem of self-identity and the name, i.e. 'Am I that name?', and on the question of who is behind the figure of figuration, the defaced behind the face? Judith Butler's explanation, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, is very helpful here:

> The 'I' can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one's own emergence as a subject who can know, and so constitute a set of origins that one can narrate only at the expense of authoritative knowledge.[499]

Derrida articulates the problematic desire behind the autobiographical impulse through the relationship between auto-affection and death, i.e. the autobiographical 'scene of writing' necessarily passes through death (as seen in the passage from 'As If I Were Dead' quoted above) and the impossibility of externalising one's innermost autobiographical experience. But what does it mean to be dead, when at the moment of writing (or speaking) you are obviously alive? It means, according to Derrida,

that you look at things the way they are *as such*, you look at the object *as such*. To perceive the object as such implies that you perceive the object as it is or as it is supposed to be when you are not there (...). So, to relate to an object *as such* means to relate to it as if you were dead. That's the condition of truth, the condition of perception, the condition of objectivity, at least in their most conventional sense.[500]

It is the necessarily *fictional* aspect of the autobiographical or of life writing in general, that allows both for the best and the worst, absolute fear and uplifting hope, that constitutes the autobiographical impulse or desire:

> What is absolutely scary is the idea of being dead while being quasi-dead, while looking at things from above, from beyond. But at the same time, it is the most reassuring hope we have that, although dead, we will continue to look, to listen to everything, to observe what's going on (…) I think it is bearable only because of the *as if*: 'as if I were dead'. But the *as if*, the fiction, the *quasi-*, these are what protect us from the real event of death itself, if such a thing exists.[501]

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[497] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 9.

[498] Cf. for example Philippe Lejeune, *Les Brouillons de soi* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

[499] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 37.

[500] Derrida, *"As if I were dead"*, p. 18.

[501] *Ibid*., pp. 20, 22.

An autobiography is thus, strictly (fictionally) speaking, 'deadly' in the sense that it requires a self-positioning based on an identification with another, objectified, or 'dead', me – a relation to me as other that is regulated by unpredictable, because unconscious, processes of auto-immuno-in- or affection.

From Life Writing to Lifewriting: Postanthropocentrism and Autobiography

At this point, it is important to stress that sustainability is about decentering anthropocentrism. The ultimate implication is a displacement of the human in the new, complex compound of highly generative posthumanities. In my view, the sustainable subject has a nomadic subjectivity because the notion of sustainability brings together ethical, epistemological, and political concerns under cover of a nonunitary vision of the subject (…). 'Life' privileges assemblages of a heterogeneous kind. Animals, insects, machines are as many fields of forces or territories of becoming. The life in me is not only, not even human.[502]

An additional complication in the pro*life*ration of the autobiographical is the question of 'zoography' (or, the involvement of the "animal aut*r*obiographique", in giving an account of oneself, already alluded to above).[503] What part does 'my' animal-life (i.e. the human body or embodiment as such) – the zoē as opposed to the bio of any 'me'[504] – play in life writing or autobiography? There always seems to be an elusive zoographical trace underneath and a zoo-ontological other who precedes and 'writes', a biography, as Judith Butler explains:

> To be a body is, in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one's life. There is a history to my body of which I can have no recollection (…). If there is, then, a part of bodily experience as well – of what is indexed by the word exposure – that cannot be narrated but constitutes the bodily condition of one's narrative account of oneself, then exposure constitutes one among several vexations in the effort to give a narrative account of oneself. There is (1) a non-narrativizable exposure that establishes my singularity, and there are (2) primary relations, irrecoverable, that form lasting and recurrent impressions in the history of my life, and so (3) a history that establishes my partial opacity to myself. Lastly, there are (4) norms that facilitate my telling about myself but that I do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity. This last dispossession in language is intensified by the fact that I give an account of myself to someone, so that the narrative structure of my account is superseded by (5) the structure of address in which it takes place.[505]

Death and obliteration at the heart of the autobiographical autoaffection are thus to be taken literally, following Butler: "To be a body is, in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one's life. There is a history to my body of which I can have no recollection".[506]

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[502] Braidotti, "The Politics of Life as *Bios/Zoē"*, pp. 189-190.

[503] Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)", p. 415.

[504] Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[505] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*; pp. 38-39.

[506] *Ibid*., p. 38.

The indispensable writing body has its own zoographical ways of inscription that may not be articulable in traditional forms of autobiographical writing and works against the idea that autobiography as a genre usually relies on the authenticity of (bodily) experience. There is thus always an experience of dispossession (or desubjectification) at work, which is experienced (or inscribed, registered) at a material, bodily level, and which is the necessary precondition for autoaffection to arise in the first place, but which can never be narrated as such. The body who experiences (or is materially inscribed by) the *auto*biography can never *be* the body who narrates the auto*bio*graphy. There is, in fact, a disjuncture between bodies at work within the autobiographical process: material, somatic, phenomenological, narrating and narrated, to name but a few. This disjuncture is mediated and produced by technics (from speaking and writing to microchips and new social media)[507] and is giving way to the awareness that an autobiography is always a recording of two identities, an individual, 'personal' one, that is singular, a 'haecceity', as well as a species, 'bodily' one, that is entangled with its technical and planetary environment.

In the context of an emergent global environmental consciousness as well as ambient 'species angst' regarding the survival of human and nonhuman life on Earth, the genre of lifewriting is taking on species and planetary dimensions. Autobiography in the Anthropocene, or lifewriting in the face of extinction, however, should maybe regarded with some scepticism, as Claire Colebrook cautions:

> History is no longer a human narrative, and human narratives themselves seem to incorporate forces that are no longer human (…). [N]ot only have we humanized the emergence of humans from deep time (by regarding evolution as being oriented towards adaptation), but we have also domesticated the sense of the human end (…). Rather than celebrating or affirming a post-human world, where man no longer deludes himself with regard to his primacy or distinction, and rather than asserting the joyous truth of ecology where life is finally understood as one vast, self-furthering interconnected organic whole, we should perhaps take note of the violent distinction of the human. For some time now, humans have been proclaiming their capacity to render themselves figurally extinct. All those claims for man's specialness, for the distinction of reason, for human exceptionalism have given way to claims for unity, mindfulness, the global brain and a general ecology (…). But his sense of human absence is not only delusional; it is symptomatic and psychotic (…) precisely when man ought to be a formidable presence, precisely when we should be confronting the fact that the human species is exceptional in its distinguishing power, we affirm that there is one single, interconnected, life-affirming ecological totality.[508]

The 'figural' disappearance of the human (singular and species) is inscribed in the very desire of autobiographical autoaffection. At a time of growing extinction threats and planetary entanglement it would be hazardous to forget this. Life is nothing outside narration – humans' special responsibility, one could say. But without life there would be nothing to narrate, of course. This is where we enter the territory of posthumanist literature more generally I would argue – the auto-bio-graphy of the human under the conditions of its own disappearance in the variety of its forms, genres and narrative media.

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[507] Cf. Smith, "Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries", pp.570 ff.

[508] Claire Colebrook, "Introduction: Extinction. Framing the End of the Species", in: Colebrook ed. *Extinction* (Living Books About Life, 2011), n.p.; available online at: http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Extinction/Introduction (accessed 30/11/2023).

11 Zoontotechnics – Cultured Meat, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Life after Animals

> [A] fundamental predicament for humans at the present moment within the Anthropocene (or properly human era) would appear to boil down to just this: on the one hand a recognition that humanity has come to be where it is due to a basically violent relation to non-human nature and animality, and on the other hand a sense that the nest of values, institutions, and practices that comprise the properly human world somehow require this violence in order to continue running as they are.[509]

Zoontotechnics, or Life, in Theory

> Pourquoi, au fond, ce désir de se débarrasser des animaux?[510]

Something like artificial meat has been almost a staple or standard topic in science and speculative fiction for the past century and even in praxis muscle tissue has been kept alive and grown in petri dishes for almost as long. Nevertheless, somehow this 'outrageous' and slightly 'monstrous' phrase, 'cultured meat', is a good illustration of what the equally monstrous, 'zoontotechnics', might mean.[511] Zoontotechnics in the current techno(cultural) science factional environment[512] conjures up nightmarish visions of all sorts of "electric animals",[513] biotech chimeras and 'humanimal' zoos.[514] Behind this monstrous compound with its complicated syntax combining zoo/zoē + ontology + technics lies the question of the

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[509] David Baumeister, "Derrida on Carnophallogocentrism and the Primal Parricide", *Derrida Today* 10.1 (2017): 66.

[510] Joycelyne Porcher, *Vivre avec les animaux: Une utopie pour le XXIe siècle* (Paris : La Découverte, 2011), p. 125 (Why, at bottom, this desire to get rid of animals?).

[511] "Zoontotechnics (Animality/Technicity)" was a conference organised by the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory at Cardiff University on 12-14 May 2010. The call for papers is still available on the UPenn site at: https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2009/08/18/zoontotechnics-animality-technicity-conference-cardiff-university-12-14-may-2010 (accessed 22/01/2024), but no proceedings were ever published. The core of the CFP provides the following context, namely "philosophical-ethical revaluations of the 'animal'", "renewed reflections on various aspects of technology and technics", both within and beyond "the emerging framework of posthumanism". Of the listed topics the conference was seeking to address, this chapter replies to and illustrates the following: "the relation of animality and/or technicity to posthumanism". At the conference, I was reassured by the fact that another participant, Neil Stephens, had made the same connection as me, in a paper entitled "Animality/Technicity for Lunch? Understanding In-Vitro Meat". Neil Stephens at the time was Cesagen Research Associate at Cardiff, member of the Genomics Network and specialist on stem cell research. He has since become one of the most important commentators on the topic of cultured or in vitro meat. I will return to some of his more recent publications below.

[512] On the notion of 'science faction', see my *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[513] Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[514] Cf. Donna Haraway's discussion of 'oncomouse', in: *Modest-Witmess@Second_millennium. FemaleMan©_Meets_Oncomouse©* (New York: Routledge, 1997), or Eduardo Kac's transgenic 'green rabbit' (which also makes a few appearances in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*), cf. "GFP Bunny"; available at: https://www.ekac.org/gfpbunny.html (Accessed 29/01/2024).

Aristotelian 'bare' animal life, together the entire history of Western metaphysics, including Heidegger's *Destruktion* of it, the end(s) of humanism, as well as the entire tradition of thought that addresses the co-implication of hominisation (or anthropogenesis) and technology (techno-anthropogenesis). What an explosive cocktail, indeed. And the more one thinks about possible truncations and morphological permutations the more frightening it becomes. Zoontology (Wolfe), ontotechnics (Stiegler), zootechnics (Haraway),[515] which of these morphological elements are acting as qualifiers here, and what is being qualified? Does the 'zoonto-' work like a kind of prefix, as in pyrotechnics, or anthropotechnics, for example? Does 'technics' work like a suffix to 'zoonto-' – making an endless list of other suffixations thinkable, like zoonto-genesis, zoonto-politics, zoonto-ethics etc.? And what about the infix '-onto-', which gives rise to another long list of compounds and permutations? One could brood endlessly over the implications and potentialities of these concepts which, increasingly, seem to develop a life of their own.

But since they are all more or less about the regained prominence of the question concerning the 'meaning of life' they coincide with what could be called the latest phase in cultural theory's embattled history: after the theory, culture and science wars, we are in the middle of the 'life wars' and its, obviously, a question of survival. At stake is the shifting discursive ground over what life *is*, or over 'life-itself'. Life wars, about bio-, zoo-, thanato-, necro-politics, combined with bio-, info-, cogno-, nanotechnologies applied to reproducing, hybridising the living (*le* or *les vivant(s)*) that is today giving rise to all sorts of liminal ontologies (or, following Derrida, 'hauntologies')[516] and thus theories or thinking, in between life and death. Thinking, in Derrida's words, that is neither on the side of death, which is not a side you can (ontologically) *be* on, nor entirely identical with life, and therefore on the other side of life, maybe, where all forms of life and non-life, organic and inorganic seem to have been proliferating (or pro-*life*-erating): machines, cyborgs, viruses, genes, molecules, tissues, plants, minerals, crystals etc.[517] So much so that, increasingly, in theory we are dealing with forms of neo- or even ultravitalism, some of them attempting to free themselves from the very notion of 'life', from an ontology of life, and instead turn towards an inclusive and seemingly non-normative notion of the living. What exactly, in life, is 'living'? Is it some kind of pure force, the '*élan vital*' without the dangerous expansionism associated with that notion? What is this 'bare life', or *zoē*, as opposed to *bios*, if one agrees to follow Agamben and Foucault (and Aristotle) in this distinction?[518]

No wonder that there is so much talk of 'life' in theory these days, life in all its forms: on the one hand, a plurality of life forms, but also, on the other side, of life itself, bare life, *zoē*, *bios*, but, indissociably, death and hence necro- and thanatopolitics etc.[519] It is as if the 'end of man' signalled by the antihumanist theory of the 1970sand 80s, has ironically given birth to 'life', life after people so to speak, posthumanist if not posthuman, maybe even post-theoretical, and possibly post-anthropocentric, life. For example life understood in Donna Haraway's term as 'multi-species flourishing', life in the form of bio- or zootechnical hybridisation, or the pro-*life*-eration of entangled 'naturecultures'. The last borderline and the last war was always going to be about life – life wars, or wars for life under global neoliberal conditions and their biopolitics.[520]

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[515] Cf. Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); and Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[516] For the notion of 'hauntology', or the necessarily haunting quality of the ontological, see Derrida's, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* [1993] (London: Routledge, 1994).

[517] Cf. Derrida, *H. C. for Life…That Is to Say* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

[518] Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[519] Achile Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

A few names are key to this turn to and proliferation of life in theory today. On the one hand, on the one side, approaching life from the side of death, so to speak, the late followers of Aristotle: Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben etc. These are all in their own way thinkers of biopolitics as based on the impossible but necessary distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, and the ways in which modernity has been blurring this distinction. This distinction due to the generalisation of what Abamben (following Carl Schmitt) calls the 'state of exception' gives way to the exposure of 'bare life', which, in turn becomes the main 'material' for and therefore the main 'stake' of politics.[521]

Or, given our specific focus, the analysis of the 'meaning' of 'cultured meat', should we rather say, excuse the bad pun: the main 'steak' of politics, in memory of Roland Barthes's nation-building myth of *le steak-frites*?[522] As a more readily 'Anglo-American' association one might also think of the juicy virtuality of Cypher's steak, which makes him choose *The Matrix* over sordid 'porridge' reality.[523] The literature on the whole debate about the 'radicalisation' of Foucault's biopolitics in Agamben's work and to what extent this might or might not be complementary with Deleuze's notion of 'a life', or Derrida's use of '*le*' or '*les vivants*', has been thriving ever since.[524] It has been raising question, maybe even more crucially, to what extent these ideas are either opposed or contribute to the advent of a biotechnological society, of a biotechnical regime, based on the reproducibility of life, in Bernard Stiegler's words, where the "living (...) becomes a material for the industrial biological system", and where the biotechnological thus constitutes what he calls a "new device of tertiary retentions", which are themselves no longer controlled through scientific or theoretical criteria, but "which make it possible to produce in chimerical series, clones and other transgenic materials".[525] Another way of formulating this would be, following Eugene Thacker's call for a "biophilosophy for the 21st century", and to think of the era of merging biotech and infotech through biomedia, as the time of 'generalised breeding' – a 'pastoral' theme dear to Heidegger and his late follower Peter Sloterdijk, who suggests that we should see humanism as precisely that: a (by now failing) 'breeding' technique.[526]

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[520] Amongst the many titles that have spawned the theoretical discussion of biopolitics under global neoliberal conditions and biodigital technoscience see the seminal Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[521] See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[522] Roland Barthes, "Steak and Chips", *Mythologies* [1957] (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 62-64.

[523] *The Matrix*, dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski (Warner Bros., 1999).

[524] Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essay on A Life* (New York: Zone Books, 2001); Jacques Derrida, *Life Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

[525] Bernard Stiegler, "Technoscience and Reproduction", *Parallax* 13.4 (2007): 38.

[526] Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

On the other side of the bio-technics and necropolitics camp, maybe on the side of life-as-such (or 'life itself'), are the late and distant followers of Spinoza, Bergson, and Darwin, for example Deleuze and Guattari, Keith Ansell Pearson, or Rosi Braidotti and others, who are, one might say, proponents of a 'new vitalism' based on the idea of 'biocentrism' (as opposed to humanist, or *trans*humanist, anthropocentrism). Biocentrism is here understood as the celebration of all life, of life *as* life, life in all its *forms*, including material everyday life and maybe even artificial and technological life.[527] A life understood as "pure immanence", in the Deleuzian sense. This proliferation of life or lives, related to the rise of 'life sciences' and 'life technologies', including the advent of 'artificial life', goes far beyond any known modern Foucauldian "technologies of the self".[528] It has been critically developed in works by the already mentioned Nicolas Rose, as well as by Melinda Cooper, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, Keith Ansell Pearson, Susan Squier, or Richard Doyle, and so many others.[529]

While Agamben's take has been widely discussed, the new vitalism is maybe a little less present. To catch its mood I will look at a text by Rosi Braidotti, who accuses Agamben and arguably the entire 'phallogocentric' philosophical tradition he inherits and continues, of a "fixation on Thanatos" or, indeed, of "necropolitics". This stands in contrast to a more feminist emphasis on life-affirming biopolitics and its materialism (hence the label of 'feminist new materialism' this has given rise to). Instead, Braidotti (and others like Cixous before her, and a whole list of other feminist writers),[530] on her side, the side of life, she claims, argues that the emphasis should fall "on the politics of life itself as a relentlessly generative force. This requires an interrogation of the shifting inter-relations between human and non-human forces. The latter are defined both as in-human and as post-human".[531] In short, Braidotti thinks that "death is overrated". What she wishes to put in the place of "bio-power and necro-politics" is "the primacy of life as zoē", understood as "vitalistic, prehuman, generative life".[532] In thus opposing necropolitics, Braidotti follows Deleuze and Guattari in an attempt to "trespass all metaphysical boundaries" by celebrating a "becoming animal, becoming other, becoming insect, becoming machine", in short, becoming a "posthuman" body in what, to me at least, does not seem a particularly enviable prospect, however, namely: "a living piece of meat activated by electric waves of desire, a script written by the unfolding of genetic encoding, a text composed by the enfolding of external prompts".[533]

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[527] Cf. Scott Lash, "Technological Forms of Life", *Theory, Culture and Society* 18.1 (2001): 105-120.

[528] Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock, 1988).

[529] Melinda Cooper's *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2008), Kaushik Sunder Rajan's *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), Eric L. Santner's *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), Susan Squier's *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), or Richard Doyle's *Wetwares: Experiments in Postvital Living* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

[530] For an overview see Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[531] Braidotti, "Bio-power and Necro-politics: Reflections on an ethics of sustainability", *Springerin – Hefte für Gegenwartskunst* 2 (2007): n.p.; available online at: https://springerin.at/en/2007/2/biomacht-und-nekro-politik/ (accessed 29/01/2024).)

[532] Braidotti, "The Politics of Life as Bios/Zoē", in: Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke, eds., *Bits of Life*: *Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), p. 177.

I hardly need to spell out how uncannily this resonates with the descriptions of cultured meat above (and further discussed below). This "becoming corpse" which Braidotti understands as a return to a "Spinozist ontology" set against the "metaphysics of finitude", which according to her negate life and overrates death, is affirmative, or the affirmation of life itself. It is 'neomaterialist', 'feminist' and 'embodied' and above all 'ecological' and 'postanthropocentric' in her words:

> The vital politics of life as zoē, defined as a generative force, resets the terms of the debate and introduces an ecophilosophy of belonging that includes both species equality and posthumanist ethics.[534]

Life, Braidotti maintains, "privileges assemblages of a heterogeneous kind. Animals, insects, machines are as many fields of forces or territories of becoming. The life in me is not only, not even human".[535]

I am using Braidotti here as an example of a certain strand of post- or neovitalist posthumanism, and I have to admit that I am slightly worried by its implications, at least as worried as I am about the phrase 'cultured meat'. Worried, for example, by the liberal use of the copula 'is', proliferating wherever there is a question of life. Worried about the ontologisation of life as such, and I wonder whether theory has to change its way of speaking to life and about life, as a result. In short, I find all this undoubtedly fascinating but also a little bizarre. Over the past two decades or so, Ivan Callus and I have been wondering, maybe even brooding, over how one might come to terms with the desires and anxieties that the spectre of the posthuman and the process of posthumanisation (or even posthominisation, if one is to believe the transhumanists) raises, while remaining 'critical' (which, no doubt, somewhere involves a space for a 'posthumanist', but not necessarily posthuman, subject). While the posthuman, as a figure, has been proliferating, and has indeed been *breeding* and interbreeding in an increasingly frenzied way, we have been trying to investigate theory's human *brooding* habits, so to speak. Zooming in onto the word 'brooding' suggested itself almost automatically when I began exploring the monstrosity of 'zoontotechnics' at work in the technoscientific and technocultural construction of cultured meat.

Meat, Cultured

> The story of [cultured meat] is a story of framing links between the now and a realm of potential futures.[536]

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[533] *Ibid*., p. 180.

[534] *Ibid*., p .183.

[535] *Ibid*., pp. 189-190.

[536] Neil Stephens, Alexandra E. Sexton and Clemens Driessen, "Making Sense of Making Meat: Key Moments in the First 20 Years of Tissue Engineering Muscle to Make Food", *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 3 (2019): 45.

What exactly would the ontology of cultured meat be? Despite all the arguments for and the undeniable benefits of regenerative tissue engineering, giving it a commercial boost by using its techniques to solve the growing demand for meat, to combat the economic inefficiency and the negative environmental consequences of intensive *in vivo* meat production, i.e. farming, breeding and slaughtering, not to speak of the reduction in animal suffering, despite all this, there is something 'disturbing' about the vision of a vegetarian future thanks to *in-vitro* produced meat. It is as if our meat culture believes it might cure itself by tucking into cultured meat, by having its meat cake and eating it, so to speak. In my brooding over this disconnect I was assisted by Erica Fudge (building on Jacques Derrida, in turn), who asks:

> If questions about nutritional value are set aside, what purpose does the act of consuming an animal possess? I take this as my central question here because meat-eating is not just an issue of nutrition: as Derrida wrote [in "Eating well"]: 'and who can be made to believe that our cultures are carnivorous because animal proteins are irreplaceable?' There is something else going on when an animal's flesh is consumed.[537]

Nick Fiddes's classic sociological study of meat and its symbolic value concludes that "meat's pre-eminence in our food system derives primarily from its tangibly representing to us the principle of human power over nature".[538] It is a symbol by which "western society – like many other societies – has long expressed its relationship to the world that it inhabits", which means that we do not eat meat "*in spite of* the domination of sentient beings", as a society, but "*because* of that power": [539]

> It is not that we each consciously exult in our mastery of nature whenever we bite into a piece of flesh, but we are brought up within a culture which has regarded environmental conquest as a laudable goal, and which has deployed meat as a primary means to demonstrate it.[540]

It is of course an ontological aspect, even an anthropo-onto-technical one that underlies carnivorousness or 'carnivoracity'. In eating the (significant) other I am becoming a self, by affirming my dominion, legitimated by my radical difference, established through the power to consume or assimilate, I become human. Or, as Fudge puts it: "Meat-eating is hegemonic in anthropocentric societies".[541]

Interestingly, Fudge concludes her amplification of Derrida's notion of 'carno-phallo-logo-centrism' by looking at in vitro meat production and asks why we do not just give up eating meat altogether instead of producing "fake meat"? And she goes on to answer her own question thus:

> Without meat-eating there is a possibility that we would no longer be human as we currently understand the term (…). By implication, we in the west need to have dominion represented, legitimated and authenticated by animal flesh to be who we think we

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[537] Erica Fudge, "Why it is easy to be vegetarian", *Textual Practice* 24.1 (2010): 149 (149-166).

[538] Nick Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 225-226.

[539] *Ibid*., p. 226 (original emphasis).

[540] *Ibid*.

[541] Fudge, "Why it is easy to be vegetarian", p. 149.

> currently are. Without the categorical differences that dominion establishes, that sense of self would be lost.[542]

Fiddes, unsurprisingly, therefore goes on to paint an ambiguous picture regarding the 'future of meat'. Even though in vitro or cultured meat was not on Fiddes's sociological radar at the time, the developments he describes in his final future-oriented chapter are to us entirely recognisable and explain how the industrialisation of meat production should almost necessarily lead to 'synthetic' solutions because of falling "over-the-counter sales of red meat production":

> Increasingly, producers have had to divorce their products from associations with the flesh of real, live animals in order to maintain customer acceptability (…). A plethora of prepared and processed products is the result. In the process, however, the industry may well have sown for itself the seeds of an even greater problem. Heavily advertised 'coated nuggets' and exotic vacuum-packed dishes have persuaded consumers to continue buying meat in various new forms, but have also consolidated many people's disinclination to deal directly with raw flesh. The danger for meat producers is that there may be little further potential for disguising the product, and little prospect of convincing an increasingly squeamish public to return to the old ways.[543]

Given that Fiddes's study immediately follows the BSE scandal of the mid 1980s, it probably did not require a lot of imagination to predict that "a collapse of consumer confidence in the products of the industrial food industry look[ed] increasingly possible".[544] However, according to Fiddes, who captured a rising global awareness of concerns regarding sustainability throughout the 1980s, 1990s and ever since, it is the recognition that "non-human environment has needs which must sometimes override our immediate demands" to avoid "catastrophic deterioration in local and global ecosystems", that has caused the "reputation of meat, as a continuing symbol of human domination of nature" to suffer most severely.[545] Even though Fiddes's prediction that meat eating might eventually develop an equally negative image as unhealthy and anti-social as smoking, given the steady increase of vegetarianism and veganism, has not (yet) materialised, he might well have been right in claiming that "the turbulently declining reputation of meat, at the advent of the third millennium, may be a harbinger of the evolution of new values".[546] However, similar to 'real' (i.e. tobacco) smoking giving way to vaping, 'real' meat might increasingly be morphing into 'artificial' or cultured 'meat'.

Fudge's 'zoontological' argument for vegetarianism needs to be placed into this context. Giving up human dominion by deconstructing carnophallologocentric meat culture and by thereby risking our becoming inhuman, unhuman, or simply (nonhuman) animals, opens up some fascinating possibilities that are nevertheless at least as frightening as those provided by the cultured meat scenario itself. Fudge herself hints at the fact that giving up humanist (read: anthropocentric) ideas, values and justifications of 'dominion' that legitimate being carnivorous, erases the boundary between human and nonhuman animals not necessarily in view of a generalised vegetarianism but quite possibly something like the opposite, namely a generalised 'cannibalism':

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[542] Fudge, "Why it is easy to be vegetarian", pp. 161-162.

[543] Fiddes, *Meat,* p. 231.

[544] *Ibid*.

[545] *Ibid*., p. 232.

[546] *Ibid*., p. 233.

> Eating meat is a declaration of human dominion (to consume animal flesh is to declare – with the teeth if not the voice – that these creatures are lower than us, that we have power over them). But eating meat is also an action that can, possibly, undo that dominion (…). [H]ow do you know you are not eating a human as you tuck into a steak?[547]

Because, one could say, in the end, 'we (human and nonhuman animals) are all meat', even 'dead meat', or worse, 'zombie meat', floating, growing, decaying in our own culture-media-serum – this is Haraway's idea of natureculture and Braidotti's 'posthuman body' pushed to a biotech extreme, one might argue. The end of human exceptionalism undoubtedly can also mean that: ultimate objectification and commodification of generalised humanimal meat. This is the reason, in my view, why a more vigilant posthumanism might be called for, maybe a posthumanism that is more of the slow, brooding, kind.

One starting point could be to look again at cultured meat – the in vitro production of animal muscle tissue for human consumption – and ask what exactly it is that causes the squeamishness, the 'disgust' or at least the deep ambiguity *vis-à-vis* what could, after all, by bypassing the whole rearing, farming and slaughtering process, spell the end of animal cruelty and thus of many animal rights concerns.? Might cultured meat not, eventually, allow us to tackle the whole idea of an essentially sacrificial metaphysics underpinning human exceptionalism (i.e. Derrida's notion of 'carnophallogocentrism').[548] As some animal rights groups have reportedly signalled: as far as we are concerned, if meat is no longer a piece of a dead animal there is no ethical objection to consume it, thus plunging into crisis the whole ideology of vegetarianism as we know it. My question would be whether growing animal tissue for consumption is still merely a matter of breeding and hence the next phase of zoontotechnics, or whether it already hints at a new kind of ontology, or hauntology, or *zoo*hauntology to be more precise? Is it, not technically but ontologically, or ontotechnologically speaking, more like (animal) *brooding*, rather than the necessarily anthropocentric idea of *breeding* which somewhere, even if problematically, always presupposes a presumably quite human subject? In the standard accounts of hominisation breeding animals is usually seen as a key moment within anthropogenesis – agriculture and farming are the key 'technologies' responsible for the advent of 'society'.

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[547] Fudge, "Why it is easy to be vegetarian", p. 160.

[548] See David Baumeister's illuminating essay on "Derrida on Carnophallogocentrism and the Primal Parricide", cited as epigraph above, which helps clarify and substantiate Derrida's link between Freud's 'primal parricide' (and cannibalism) and the "schema of ingestion, symbolic yet constitutive, [which] underlies the human-animal relation", and which explains carnophallogocentrism's "contribution to the history of 'anthropo-centric subjectivity'" (p. 53):

> The animal father had already been proto-human and it was, after all, the desire on the part of the brothers to take the *animal* father's place (and not to become *human*) that motivated the parricide in the first place. At the same time, those brothers who enter into the civilizing contract post-mortem, though the first humans, retain a mark of the animal in their ritual re-ingestion of the father in the form of the sacrificial eating of non-human animals. Any pure humanity they might have is compromised by the repetition of this ritual sacrifice. (62; original italics)

In vitro, synthetic or cultured meat can be therefore seen as the ultimate stage of animal meat production, as Jocelyne Porcher maintains,[549] because of its promises of increased productivity and efficiency, of its superior 'zootechnics', with the added 'bonus' of reducing animal suffering (by *de facto* reducing animal existence it has to be conceded). As 'side-effects', it also promises to improve hygiene, food safety and reducing health hazards due to zoonoses (like BSE or COVID-19). On the other hand, from a more radical vegetarian/vegan point of view – despite the aspect of reducing animal suffering – in vitro meat could also be seen as a continuation of the human indulgence in animal instrumentalisation through ingestion. It would thus merely constitute an evasive action and a failure to tackle the real 'ethical' problems that animal liberation and radical ecology have been exposing. As part of a more general move towards tissue-engineering, stem-cell research and genetic-engineering, in vitro meat might also be seen as a mere by-product of larger, traditional humanist, concerns regarding the use of human tissue and human DNA for genetic and transgenic purposes, be they 'medical' or 'alimentary'.

After the "Zoontotechnics" conference, Neil Stephens went on to engage with my suggestion to understand cultured meat as 'zombie meat' or, more generally, as part of a general trend towards the 'zombification' (understood as a threat of the 'living-dead, dead-living or the living-never born' to the distinction between life and death). Cultured meat could be seen as part of this trend due to the further erosion of the human-animal boundary and the transformation of bio-techno-politics into a more general zoo-techno-politics it makes thinkable.[550] Stephens, however, proposes to treat in vitro meat as an "as-yet undefined ontological object" due to its largely 'promissory' (or one might also say 'speculative') character. It is in fact not only an *unrealised* ontological object but also a largely *discursive* object around which various future-oriented narratives have been constructed. As Stephens explains: "Such narratives seek to establish socio-temporal alignments between the material, the political, the commercial and the edible, in a formation that facilitates success in the field" (which includes the Stephens's own field of the sociology of science and technology, of course).[551]

Promissory narratives play a key role in the material-discursive 'construction' of in vitro meat, and the questions of commercial viability, social acceptance and ethical value it raises – and all this (as yet) more or less regardless of its actual technical feasibility. It is not only an as-yet unidentified ontological but also a so far purely 'promissory' or speculative object due to the great number of practical and ethical obstacles it continues to encounter (the question of the sourcing of the serum, the scaffolding technique, the 'texture' of the final product, the enormous production costs and energy needed, the question of the 'donor' animals and their treatment, and so on). This is not to say that cultured meat is 'pure' science (or speculative) fiction, but in fact it is science that deliberately blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction in a futural register (or "science faction", as I called it; i.e. "promissory science, one that exists more in the speculations and promises of its supporters than in terms of scientific results and marketable products").[552]

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[549] Porcher, *Vivre avec les animaux*, pp. 121-126.
[550] Neil Stephens, "In Vitro Meat: Zombies on the Menu?" *Scripted* 7.2 (2010): 399-400.
[551] *Ibid*., p. 400.

Brooding

> What humanists have blinded themselves to is the fact that a shepherd does not only herd but also cull, that he is both a herder and a breeder.[553]

I would argue, however, that *brooding* rather than *breeding*, zoontotechnically speaking, might be the more essential 'life technology'. To brood means "to incubate; to warm, protect, or cover (your young) with your wings or body", as the *OED* defines. In human animals, however, brooding also seems to bring about some surprising side-effects: "to think or worry persistently or moodily about; to ponder*;* to dwell on a subject or to meditate with morbid persistence" (*OED*). Why the negative connotations, if the process is ontologically so fundamental, if it links us as a species to arguably our most fundamental 'technics' while also putting us at least on a par with 'ruminating' cattle and 'pondering' poultry?

All these ruminations, one might say, are the result of the firing of a few synapses stimulated by the phrase 'cultured meat' and the subsequent association with brooding as something in between zoo- and anthropotechnics, or indeed even 'theriotechnics', because it is a technics 'before' any distinction between human and nonhuman animals. And this is the point where one could add another ingredient to the culture serum. In Peter Sloterdijk's provocative interventions a while ago, developing what he called a "prophetic anthropology",[554] he discussed the notion of 'anthropotechnics' – the evolutionary 'production' of the human alongside the development of technics and technology (which parallels Bernard Stiegler's work). Given this long term (anthropotechnical) view of hominisation, the current biotechnological turn is merely the latest development in the creation of the necessary conditions under which the anthropotechnical production proper of the human can occur. From the originary condition Sloterdijk refers to as the "human greenhouse" (*Menschentreibhaus*), an 'insulation mechanism' that creates a protective interiority where human evolution and especially human 'cerebralisation' can take place, derives the contemporary prospect of an anthropogenesis as an (auto)anthropotechnical 'breeding process' through bioengineering (i.e. eugenics).

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[552] Adam Hedgcoe, *The Politics of Personalised Medicine: Pharmacogenetics in the Clinic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 27, quoted by Stephens in "Growing Meat in Laboratories: The Promise, Ontology, and Ethical Boundary-Work of Using Muscle Cells to Make Food", *Configurations* 21.2 (2013): 162. As Stephens et al. explain in a later study in which they seem themselves to be much more implicated in this process of discursive construction of cultured meat as future solution of global climate change, and which needs to overcome 'challenges' to fit into the emerging neoliberal marketisation of what they now, interestingly, call "the emerging field of cellular agriculture": "Large-scale production [of in vitro meat] is significantly more challenging, the key issue being the production of effective and appropriately priced culture media. The most ambitious production target – producing cultured meat on a scale that could make marked impacts on global climate change – is likely to take many decades, if it is at all possible" (cf. Stephens et al., "Bringing cultured meat to market: Technical, socio-political, and regulatory challenges in cellular agriculture", *Trends in Food Science and Technology* 78 (2018): 163). In a slightly later, also co-authored, article Stephens provides once again a more critical intervention and gives an account of "the first twenty years of tissue engineering muscle to make food". He also differentiates between various phases and themes, i.e. the "cultured meat institutional context" and the "cultured meat interpretative package" (Stephens, Sexton and Driessen, "Making Sense of Making Meat", p. 1). While the technical issues for cultured meat production largely remain, the discursive construction, one could argue, has substantially concretised in terms of vying for investment and finding the right marketing pitch – what one might call the discursive 'normalisation' of speculative meat and the anticipated speculation on its future market value. A classic case of "reified life", one might argue, cf. J. Paul Narkunas, *Reified Life: Speculative Capital and the Ahuman Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

[553] Hannes Bergthaller, "Housebreaking the Human Animal: Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*", *English Studies* 91.7 (2010): 734.

Current eugenics, tissue engineering and biotechnology in general would thus merely be the logical outcome if not the logical conclusion of the original exteriorised zoo-anthropo-technics of (cattle) breeding, which itself, in turn, was made possible by the interiorised creation of a protective 'bubble' for brooding. One would need a lot more time and space to do justice to Sloterdijk's argument, but what interests me here in particular is how Sloterdijk, in following and radicalising Heidegger (and arguably, virtually all those thinkers for whom technics remains fundamentally anthropotechnics), ignores or at least downplays the 'animal question' that is at the core of hominisation and anthropotechnics, for it remains unclear as to what extent the human greenhouse (the 'breeding' place where humans can brood) would be radically different from the 'brooding' process going on in the 'animal realm' more generally. Brooding, is a much more fundamental 'theriotechnics' and as such precedes and underlies Sloterdijk's model, but remains repressed.

The generalised brooding metaphor, however, is also what opens up this fascinating but 'monstrous' parallel I have been brooding about, namely the various biotechnological 'meat culture' scenarios outlined above, as a quite unforeseen by-product of the erosion of the human-animal boundary. The erosion due to the advent of cultured meat and tissue engineering might, quite unexpectedly, not only lead to the 'end' of vegetarianism and to new forms of cannibalism, but maybe to the end of animals as such. It also shows that behind the current theoretical return to questions of 'life', 'bare life', 'bios' versus 'zoē' etc., lies a more fundamental anxiety than the question of the human or the animal, namely what one might call the (zo)ontology of brooding itself. It is an entirely different form of 'biopolitics', one that promises to upset (t)issues of life even 'before' the distinction between animal and human, and maybe even before the vegetal and the animal. It is therefore also located before any 'imaginary' alternative between vitalist (or affirmative) biopolitics and necropolitics.

Speculative Fiction – Oryx and Crake and *Cultured Meat*

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[554] Peter Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark – Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp: 1999), translated as: "Rules of the Human Zoo: A Response to the *Letter on Humanism*", *Environment and Planning* D 27 (2009): 12-28; and its companion piece: *Das Menschentreibhaus – Stichworte zur historischen und prophetischen Anthropologie* (Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften: 2001).

> Literature is an uttering, or outering, of the human imagination. It puts the shadowy forms of thought and feeling – heaven, hell, monsters, angels, and all – out into the light, where we can take a good look at them and perhaps come to a better understanding of who we are and what we want, and what our limits may be. Understanding the imagination is no longer a pastime or even a duty but a necessity, because increasingly, if we can imagine something, we'll be able to do it.[555]

The text that brings all these aspects together, in my view, is Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003).[556] Atwood classifies her novel as "speculative fiction",[557] which, as she explains, more so than science fiction proper, allows authors like her to "explore", e.g. "consequences of new and proposed technologies in graphic ways, by showing them fully up and running". It also allows her to "explore the nature and limits of what it means to be human in graphic ways, by pushing the envelope as far as it will go".[558] This exploration – which coincides both with posthumanist theory and the kind of science faction to be encountered in popular science magazines as well as science policy documents like the ones surrounding cultured meat with its 'promissory' narratives – allows the writer to stretch the imagination while still using the 'conventions of realism'. *Oryx and Crake* in this sense, even though it pictures a postapocalyptic scenario, after the near-extinction of the human species through an extreme act of bioterrorism, is not only a classic science fictional 'dystopia' combined with a 'last man narrative' but also contains 'utopian' elements of what a biotechnologically determined world might look like – a fact that led Atwood to speak of a new genre – "ustopias" (a combination of utopia and dystopia, which signals their inevitable entanglement).[559]

What Atwood thus explores in *Oryx and Crake* is "how far can humans go in the alteration department before those altered cease to be human?"[560] On the one hand, she focuses on a group of 'designer people', the 'Crakers'. These are named Crake, the bioengineer responsible for the near-extinction of non-genetically engineered humans, and who is himself named after an extinct bird. He develops the virus who kills of all the 'non-designed' humans and animals, except for his friend Jimmy, who having received an antidote by Crake believes himself to be the lone human survivor and calls himself (the abominable) 'Snowman'. There are also many other engineered 'creatures' in the book, most importantly for my present context, the so-called "Chickie Nobs" – "chicken objects modified so they grow multiple legs, wings, and breasts. They have no heads, just a nutrient orifice at the top, thus solving a problem for animal rights workers: as their creators say, ‘No Brain, No Pain’”.[561] In brackets, Atwood adds: “(Since *Oryx and Crake* was published, the Chickie Nob solution has made giant strides: lab-grown meat is now a reality, though it is probably not in your sausage yet)”.[562]

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[555] Margaret Atwood, "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context'", *PMLA* 119.3 (2004): 517.

[556] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Virago, 2004).

[557] Atwood, "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context'". I will not be providing a detailed reading of the novel, nor will I speak about its immediate context, as part of the *The MaddAddam Trilogy*. Neither can I provide an overview of the extensive literature that has since accumulated on *Oryx and Crake*. However an early chapter I can recommend is Coral Ann Howells's "Margaret Atwood's dystopian visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*", in: Howells, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 161-175. I will instead focus on those readings that have specifically foregrounded the aspect of cultured meat in the speculative biotechnological framework the novel 'imagines'.

[558] Atwood, "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context'", p. 525.

[559] Atwood, "Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia", in: Atwood, *In Other Worlds* (London: Virago, 2011), pp. 66-96.

[560] *Ibid*., p. 91.

Literary and cultural criticism has since, unsurprisingly, focused on this arguably most prominent (science) fictional representation of cultured meat.[563] Susan McHugh’s often cited article on cultured meat in fiction,[564] uses *Oryx and Crake* to illustrate that “novelists have long used the disgust elicited by fake meat as a flash point for eco-minded critique”.[565] McHugh’s real interest, however, is to show how “fake meat appears to enable distinctions among human, animal, and other agency forms”, a context in which “fake meat proves one of the most effective mechanisms which the novel (…) entertains without finally deciding between humanist and posthumanist environmental perspectives”.[566] The question of where *Oryx and Crake* might stand with regard to humanism and posthumanism is a point I will return to in the conclusion. For the moment, and in the context of my discussion of what ‘zoo-ontological’ and ‘zoo-ethical’ status cultured meat might have, I will highlight what, in McHugh terms, actually questions “whether and how tissue-cultured meat remains animal”,[567] or indeed “post-animal”, and show “how much more is at stake in tissue culturing than minimalizing ecological hoofprints or alleviating farm-animal suffering”.[568] What is at stake, or at steak, with in vitro meat, as “the realization of over a century of speculative imaginaries”, as Nora Castle writes,[569] is an (ontological) ‘instability’ in the meaning cultured meat provokes, and “which requires both a distancing from and a connection to the ‘animal’ in order to ‘succeed’ either as a retail product or in its self-assigned techno-utopic environmental and ethical mission”.[570] And as I would add, it highlights the crucial ambiguity that the ‘animal’ (and our partaking in ‘animality’) plays for posthumanist thinking more generally, i.e. ‘we’ humans are animals, ‘we’ humans eat animals, but what exactly distinguishes eating (nonhuman) animal meat from eating human ‘flesh’ or cannibalism?

In other words, it is the (humanist, anthropocentric) distinction between human and animal that is at steak in cultured meat and the speculative and science factional narratives that are constructed around it which play with a ‘post-animal’ discursive imaginary.[571] According to Castle, Atwood’s “ChickieNobs” enact a twofold critique. On the one hand, they evoke the way nonhuman farm animals are ‘de-animalised’ through mass-production by industrialised agriculture under neoliberal bio-zoo-techno-economic conditions. On the other hand, the in vitro meat of Atwood's novel shows another stage in nonhuman animal 'subjugation', through genetic technology and ultimately 'zombification', as mentioned above, i.e. through transformation into living-dead nutritional material (as distinct from any purely vegetal, i.e. 'vegan', food source):

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[561] *Ibid*., p. 92.

[562] *Ibid*.

[563] This is despite the fact that *Oryx and Crake* is only briefly mentioned in McCorry and John Miller’s volume on literature’s engagement with ‘meat critique’, cf. Miller, “The Literary Invention of In Vitro Meat: Ontology, Nostalgia and Debt in Pohl and Kornbluth’s *The Space Merchants*”, in: McCorry and Miller, eds, *Literature and Meat since 1900* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 96.

[564] Susan McHugh, “Real Artificial: Tissue-cultured Meat, Genetically Modified Farm Animals, and Fictions”, *Configurations* 18.1-2 (2010): 181-197.

[565] *Ibid*., p. 181.

[566] *Ibid*., p. 184.

[567] *Ibid*., p. 191.

[568] *Ibid*., p. 197.

[569] Nora Castle, “In Vitro Meat and Science Fiction: Contemporary Narratives of Cultured Flesh”, *Extrapolation* 63 (2022): 150.

[570] *Ibid*., pp. 150-151.

[571] *Ibid*., pp. 156-157.

> In order to succeed as a product, [in vitro meat] needs to be identified as *meat*, as opposed to plant-based 'meat' products or vegetarian/vegan alternatives like tofu. It simultaneously, however, needs to be distinct from *animal*, to maintain distance from the negative associations of industrial animal agriculture. The ChickieNobs reassert the animal-ness of lab-grown meat, even as the animal-ness they depict is contorted and horrific.[572]

We are thus here concerned with a "transformation in the genetic manipulation of [nonhuman animals] for the benefit of humans",[573] which has implications for both, human and nonhuman animals. In fact, in vitro meat and the promissory role it is supposed to play may be bad news both for animals and humans; for nonhuman animals because their genetic transformation into 'living-dead' material under neoliberal conditions spells out a further 'devaluation', distancing and invisibilisation; for humans, because it does not really tackle the carnophallogocentric problem of meat-eating but in fact opens up the question of cannibalism, or: why would it be so wrong to do the obvious – treat humans just as animals and use their 'flesh' as 'meat', provided it can be sourced purely genetically. ChickieNobs or Manburgers, what would, in fact, be the difference? Post-animal, post-human, neoliberal bio-zoo-technology would preferably make 'zombies' of all of 'us'; and, best of all, from a vegan (maybe les form a critical animal studies) point of view, there are unlikely to be any major objections.

Unsurprisingly, Atwood's novel thus plays an important role for J. Paul Narkunas's argument in his analysis of biopolitics, "speculative capital" and the reification of life as an economic object for financial speculation.[574] Narkunas exploits the parallel between financial speculation (as the main driving force behind global neoliberalism and its increasing tendency to 'reify' life and turn it into a consumable thanks to a combination of digitalisation and genetics) and speculative fiction, which he, nevertheless claims as a "set of tools for thinking life differently, enfiguring these alternative lives and modes of thought that already reside among us".[575] *Oryx and Crake* with its postapocalyptic setting and its genetically altered or 'transgenic' (post)humans and (post)animals shows the devastating effects that speculative financial capital, combined with bioengineering, might have. Narkunas recruits Atwood's novel for what he sees as the greatest danger in this context, namely the 'instrumentalisation' of life by biotechnological corporations within the context of free market capitalism – an economic process that actually welcomes or, as one might say, enacts ideas like postanthropocentrism and antispeciesism but not necessarily in the sense that critical posthumanism and animal studies might advocate them. A 'reified' notion of 'life itself' or 'life as such' as a commodity in its biocentrism actually works best if human and nonhuman animals are both seen as 'biomass' and 'biomatter' awaiting their further synthesising, commodification and consumption.

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[572] *Ibid*., p. 159 (original emphasis).

[573] *Ibid*., p. 160.

[574] Narkunas, *Reified Life*, p. 3. See also Justin Omar Jonston's more complex argument regarding the involvement of posthumanism in this process in *Posthuman Capital and Biotechnology in Contemporary Novels* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). Amelia DeFalco sees Atwood's novel's speculations more as an echo of the critiques offered by critical posthumanism, cf. her "MaddAddam, Biocapitalism, and Affective Things", *Contemporary Women's Writing* 11.3 (2017): 432-451. Most promisingly, however, in my view, Sherryl Vint proposes the notion of "epivitality" to characterise the "subsumption of life by capitalism", which demands "new biopolitical figurations", cf. her *Biopolitical Futures in Twenty-First-Century Speculative Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 3.

[575] Narkunas, *Reified Life*, p. 28.

The real question in this scheme is, who is going to be left to act as consumer if it is not humans? In a scenario where humans are both objects and subjects of bioconsumption the question of cannibalism begins to develop more than its usual symbolic meaning. Or, as Narkunas puts it bluntly: "critiques of anthropocentrism ignore how capital, through the biotechs, has already taken the piss out of the human and is creating a world that operates and creates existences outside of human conceptualization".[576] In particular, and this is also thematised in Atwood's novel, "recent advances in tissue engineering, stem cell research, and biotechnology delineate life as a nonanthropocentric process", which, according to Narkunas, requires "thinking life as an individuating process", in order to "frustrate the thingification of life that capital needs to reduce life to a network of objects".[577] Hence the 'life wars' that have been playing themselves out in theory or contemporary thought, mostly in a post-marxist and speculative register, as outlined above.

Despite the parallel of speculation in fiction and economy, both Atwood and Narkunas still seem to believe in the 'critical' possibilities of speculative fiction. At its best, Sherryl Vint claims, "speculative fiction can help us envision and materialize alternative futures that seek to transform rather than intensify contemporary injustices".[578] At its worst, however, it may be recruited, as seen in the commercial in vitro meat narratives, by those very neoliberal market forces (some) speculative fiction seeks to critique by 'imagining', or better 'imagineering',[579] its potential consequences – consequences that the 'promissory' narratives of cultured meat as a potential solution to climate change and animal suffering tend to hide or at least to downplay. Reapporpriation by the very discourse one wishes to critique is exactly the kind of challenge that (critical) posthumanism also faces in connection with its target discourse, namely humanism. This includes humanism's future trajectory as precisely that kind of discourse that increasingly embraces the combination of biotechnology and global neoliberal capitalism as the only viable, namely 'transhumanist', future. (Liberal, or rather neoliberal) humanism colludes with the new 'epivitalist' environment and goes so far as jettisoning the very human that used to be its untouchable, inalienable, centre. Humanism in its current ('promissory') transhumanist form is happy to sacrifice the last remainders of human 'bio-animality' to defend its 'essence', which it wagers is detachable from its biological substrate. It embraces biotechnology, the instrumentalisation and commodification of life in return for a (promissory) virtualised, synthetic and 'immaterial' future existence.

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[576] *Ibid*., p. 198.

[577] *Ibid*.

[578] Vint, *Biopolitical Futures in Twenty-First-Century Speculative Fiction*, p. 8. In her contribution on "Posthumanism and Speculative Fiction", in: Stefan Herbrechter et al., eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthmanism* (Cham: Springer, 2021), pp. 225-246, Vint sees speculative fiction not only as a resource for scholarship about posthumanism but also as a "site of posthumanist theorizing in its own right" (p. 235), which "fuses futures extrapolated from contemporary technological contexts with posthumanist theory" (pp. 235-236). The example she uses, interestingly, is that of "lab-grown meat" (she specifically refers to *Oryx and Crake*), which raises the question: "Does this technology save animal suffering, or does it merely further naturalize habits of meat-eating that reinforce ecologically disastrous ways of being human?" (p. 236).

[579] On the notion of 'imagineering' see Manuela Rossini, "Figurations of Posthumanity in Contemporary Science/Fiction – all too Human(ist)?" *Revista canaria de estudios ingleses* 50 (2005; special issue "Literature and Science", ed. T. Monterrey): 21-36. Another way of formulating this is provided by Arianna Ferrari and Andreas Lösch as 'envisioning', cf. their "How Smart Grid Meets In Vitro Meat: On Visions as Socio-Epistemic Practices", *Nanoethics* 11 (2017): 75-91. As they put it: "IVM has become a vision, intended as a practice capable of creating new meanings and new narratives linking topics which were previously regarded as separate. The non-medical use of a medical technology such as tissue engineering paves the way for creating food security and ethical conditions in food production"

In vitro meat, in this context, acquires 'symptomatic' value, however, not in terms of a defence of traditional humanist values based on 'disgust', but also not in terms of a traditional animal liberation and animal rights discourse with an additional ecocritical dimension. It is a symptom of the combined disappearance of human and nonhuman animals in the face of an already posthumanist (or in fact, inhuman) system – a system designed by humans, but which in fact functions best 'without' humans. Solidarity with the nonhuman animal, under these conditions, is vital for the combined survival of both humans and animals. This is not in any way a justification for the way humans have been treating 'their' nonhuman (animal) others, on the contrary; but it is an argument against the disappearance, of humans, animals and, of course, also their differentiation. It is our responsibility to guarantee not only our own survival but also that of as many of the other animals as possible – why else talk of biodiversity and its current unprecedented loss?[580]

Oryx and Crake, in my view, is something like the final argument the last humanist, Jimmy-Snowman, is having (posthumously, or posthumanly) with his 'friend', the misanthropist-cum-transhumanist, Crake, about the 'future of humanity'. What is really at stake in their argument, however, is the future of the steak, so to speak. It is no coincidence that the novel practically opens and ends on what one might call 'barbecue scenes'. The first, in the chapter entitled "Bonfire", where an "enormous pile of cows and sheep and pigs" is burnt as a result of their contamination with a malignant "bioform", possibly introduced as an act of industrial bioterrorism to "drive up prices". The smell reminds Jimmy of "the barbecue in the backyard", but the fact that the charcoaled "animals are looking at him reproachfully out of their burning eyes" makes him uncomfortable: "Steaks didn't have heads".[581]

(p. 81). In doing so, it becomes "a vision which aims at reconsidering the way in which we think about food, meat and animals. It is not only an innovation that expresses different promises and expectations (…); it also acts, empirically, as an *interface*, allowing translations between current problems of traditional meat production and consumption and images of the food of the future" (*ibid.*; original emphasis).

[580] One could argue that this also is part of what Jamie Lorimer calls "the probiotic turn" based on "human interventions that use life to manage life, working with biological and geomorphic processes to deliver forms of human, environmental, and even planetary health"; cf. Lorimer, *The Probiotic Turn: Using Life to Manage Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), p. 2.

[581] Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, pp. 17-20. This is an obvious allusion to the animal 'pyres' seen at the height of the BSE crisis, and which has been (controversially) referred to as an 'animal holocaust', as

In the last chapter of the novel, "Footprint", Jimmy-Snowman realises that he is in fact not the sole human survivor, after all, and has to come to terms with this insight, i.e. he is torn between 'empathy' for his own species and his new role of 'shepherd' of the future generation (the Crakers, or the 'new (i.e. post-) human)').[582] The encounter with the other survivors forms the other 'barbecue scene' because the other three humans ("all three of them look wasted", like Jimmy himself), "are roasting something – meat of some kind".[583] It is in fact this very carnivorous act that makes Snowman decide to kill them, because they are roasting a rakunk (a transgenic animal, a mixture of a skunk and a racoon, designed as pet). He undoubtedly remembers how upset he was, when he lost his own best rakunk friend (his mother 'released' it into the wild when she left him and his father): "They must have shot it. The poor creature". This comes only a few pages after he had to defend himself against some pigoons (pigs with human tissue and a human 'neocortex' originally designed for organ transplants) who want to eat him while vultures circle above "waiting for him to be meat".[584]

Undoubtedly, Atwood's novel is about meat, about how 'flesh' becomes 'meat', or the transition 'from animal to edible',[585] only that the human animal is no longer in control of this process. What does that mean for a species that has traditionally defined itself through its 'carnophallogocentrism'? It becomes a species that can no longer 'trust' itself. And this is, in my view, where the real posthumanist moment in *Oryx and Crake* occurs. Even while Jimmy-Snowman is disgusted by his fellow humans and their cruelty towards 'his' rakunk, he cannot help his own 'carnivorous' reflexes: "Snowman hasn't smelled roast meat for so long. Is that why his eyes are watering?"[586] The reader is here led to believe that Snowman can no longer trust his (human animal) affects – anger and hunger, empathy and rage – which further illustrates Jimmy's earlier uncanny insight: "Perhaps he was the danger, a fanged animal gazing out from the shadowy cave of the space inside his own skull".[587]

For all the speculative figurations of the 'posthuman' the novel offers, i.e. bioengineered animals and humans in a postapocalyptic world after the great evolutionary 'reset' provoked by an act of global bioterror, the only actual 'posthumanist' moment the novel, as a representative of the most humanist institution of 'literature', can produce is a crisis in self-identity: what does it mean to be human? This has been the role of literature all along, speculative or not, only that it now increasingly involves a self-doubt at a species level, not only that of the privileged individual. No doubt this is valuable, and somehow still tragically 'ennobling', but it certainly also shows that traditional (anthropo)technologies of 'self-domestication', to speak with Peter Sloterdijk once more, no longer work.[588] Under the

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Jovian Parry reminds us in "*Oryx and Crake* and the New Nostalgia for Meat", *Society and Animals* 17 (2009): 243.

[582] Even though Jimmy-Snowman sees himself, self-ironically, as an "improbable shepherd" (*Oryx and Crake*, p. 412).

[583] *Ibid*., pp. 431-432.

[584] *Ibid*., p. 416.

[585] Cf. Noelie Vialles, *Animal to Edible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[586] *Oryx and Crake*, p. 432.

[587] *Ibid*., p. 307.

[588] See Hannes Bergthaller's already cited reading of the novel in "Housebreaking the Human Animal: Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*". The reference here is again to Peter Sloterdijk's "Rules of the Human Zoo: A Response to the

condition of bio-zoo-politics and transgenic technology the human ‘self-taming’ (or ‘housebreaking’, to use Bergthaller’s term), that humanism thought it could basically achieve through ‘literacy’, is in crisis – a crisis that articulates itself, on the one hand, in (for the moment, speculative) postapocalyptic ‘world-without-us’ scenarios, and, on the other hand, in the erosion of the boundary between the human and nonhuman animal, which is itself the result of the pressure that the erosion of another boundary, namely between the organic and the inorganic, the living and the dead, has been placing on their common biology.[589]

‘Life after animals’ can thus be said to be the logical precursor to ‘life after people’. Both reveal our all-too-human obsession with our own passing, a kind of collective ‘autothanatography’,

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Letter on Humanism”, a speech which later became part of Sloterdijk’s volume *Du mußt dein Leben ändern: Über Anthropotechnik* – you have to change your life. It is not by coincidence that both Sloterdijk and Crake choose this motto by Rilke to speak of “technologies that make us (better) humans”, after the demise of humanism. See the list of Crake’s fridge magnets (*Oryx and Crake*, p. 354) where the misspelt phrase “Du musz dein Leben andern” appears just before the equally telling “To stay human is to break a limitation”.

[589] Which is, precisely, the starting point for practices that are located within contemporary ‘bioart’. In fact, it is within these ‘bioaesthetic’ critical practices that cultured meat as an ontological challenge actually made its first appearance, rather than in speculative fiction as such. I am referring specifically to Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr’s early experimental installations which are part of their “Tissue Culture and Art Project” (since 1996), e.g. the 2003 “Disembodied cuisine”, which explored and indeed pioneered, the scaffolding technique used for “victimless” lab-grown meat, and as an illustration of what they called “semi-living sculptures”. Cf. for example, Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, “Growing Semi-Living Sculptures: The Tissue Culture & Art Project”, *Leonardo* 35.4 (2002): 365-370. In extending the remit of life through tissue-engineering (biotechnology and transgenics) and creating new life forms, their aim is to increase ‘cultural awareness’ of the notion that “we are all made out of communities of cells” and to raise the ethical question of ‘care’ regarding ‘semi-living’ structures and artificial life more generally (p. 370). Like the writer of speculative fiction and the critical posthumanist, the bioartist faces the challenge of remaining critical by using the same conceptualities and, in the case of bioart, even the same practices of that which is being critiqued, i.e. speculation (of capital), humanism, and the biotech industry. See Catts and Zurr, “The Ethics of Experiential Engagement with the Manipulation of Life”, in: Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip, eds., *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 124-142. Catts and Zurr, in their bioaesthetic treatment of in vitro meat arguably still provide the best critique of the practice: “It should be remembered that animal cells cannot manufacture nutrients from nothing: in-vitro meat is merely an engineering exercise in translating/synthesising nutrients from other sources. In other words, parts of the living are fragmented and taken away from the context of the host body (and this act of fragmentation is a violent act) and are introduced to a technological mediation that further ‘abstracts’ their liveness. By creating a new class of semi-being, which is dependent on us for survival, we are also creating a new class for exploitation, as it further abstracts life and blurs the boundaries between the living and the non-living, the subjects versus objects (tools)” (cf. “Life as a Raw Material: Illusions of Control”, *Somatechnics* 2.2 (2012): 259-260). The justification for and criticality of such a bioaesthetics simply lies in the fact that “the engineering approach should not be allowed to monopolise life” (p. 260) and that the (economic) instrumentalisation of life and its ‘zombification’ as raw material will inevitably change what it means both to be human and animal (cf. Catts and Zurr, “Disembodied Livestock: The Promise of a Semi-Living Utopia”, *Parallax* 19.1 (2013): 101-113. For an insightful overview and commentary see Allison Caruth, “Culturing Food: Bioart and In Vitro Meat”, *Parallax* 19.1 (2013): 88-100. And for a reading of *Oryx and Crake* in terms of such a bioaesthetics see Slavomir Kozil, “Crake’s aesthetic: Genetically modified humans as a form of art in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59.4 (2019): 492-508.

in which we, humans, are deceptively arguing ourselves out of the picture, out thus of responsibility.[590] However, even the most radical anti- or posthumanist thinking and imagining of the end of the human cannot help but imply at least a minimal from of subjectivity that would witness this passing (as Lyotard, in fact, reminded us).[591] In the end, there is always too much reassurance even in the worst (post-post-post-) apocalyptic scenario, regardless of how inhuman it might look. Even worse, there is almost something perversely and ghostly endearing.[592] Weisman's *The World Without Us* is quite a typical example of apocalyptic human 'self-indulgence': "Is it possible that, instead of heaving a huge biological sigh of relief, the world without us would miss us?"[593] Instead, having become suspicious of or somehow vaccinated against the standard humanist culture-media-serum, I am suggesting that a posthumanist reading of the novel and the biotech-biocapital practice it speculates on, for example in the form of in-vitro meat production, makes thinkable something that is even worse than a 'world without us', namely a world without animals – not least because, in the end, this would include us. It would concern *all* animals, both human and nonhuman.

There is no question, the animal is *en vogue* and animal studies are *de rigueur*. However, beyond the fashionable aspect there is another more poignant dimension to the question of why one should get interested in animals now? The obvious connections are, on the one hand, the ongoing and arguably accelerating physical disappearance of animals under the conditions of modernity even while animal exploitation and meat-eating overall are certainly not declining (something that Carol Adams already referred to as ‘post-meat-eating’ – the continuation of meat-eating after the ‘referent’ symbolically and also materially has disappeared).[594] In addition, the erosion of what is left of so-called ‘natural habitats’, the ongoing global environmental crisis, which has been hitting animals first, as well as the radical segregation between pets and other animals, as ‘meat products’ or exotic attractions, all play a part in this ongoing and accelerating disappearing process. On the other hand, maybe more cynically but also more radically, in times of genetic ‘breeding’, boundaries between human and animal, organic and inorganic, are eroding, questioning traditional ‘purities’ and provoking new utopias of hybridity and anxieties of miscegenation. This has been Donna Haraway’s argument ever since her “Cyborg Manifesto”.[595]

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[590] Cf. my "'On not writing ourselves out of the picture…': An Interview with Stefan Herbrechter". *Antae* 1.3 (2014): 131-144. Available online at: https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/12513/1/1-3-2014.1.pdf (accessed 31/10/2023).

[591] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections of Time* [1988] (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); see also Marija Grech's *Spectrality and Survivance: Living the Anthropocene* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), which explores precisely this unsurpassable 'anthropomorphism' of a 'world-without-us' scenario and its implications.

[592] *Oryx and Crake* is no exception here. What betrays Atwood's (and literature's) 'residual humanism' is the question of narration. Who narrates the postapocalyptic last man story and for whom? The narrative perspective is actually that of a 'spectrally surviving' omniscient narrator who moves between inside and outside Jimmy-Snowman's perspective. The crisis of 'literacy' as the main humanist taming technology is also highlighted in the novel, but of course has to remain unresolved: Jimmy asks himself whether his insights into the consequences of Crake's new world should be recorded, but the question is for whom, given that "the fate of these words [is] to be eaten by beetles" (p. 405). Of course, for the sake of literature's survival and for the benefit of the spectral (post/human) reader of the future Snowman does write down his notes anyway and addresses them "to whom it may concern" (p. 403). The novel even thematises Snowman's ultimate decision to stop writing (pp. 403-405) when he becomes aware of the "romantic optimism" that is involved in the self-indulgent belief of a (human) observer after the extinction event. In doing so, it goes as far as it possibly can, but, of course, this is where the author, Atwood, has to take over and continue writing anyway. Maybe this is how to understand the stubborn humanism she displays in justifying her writing of "ustopias":

> [O]f course we should try to make things better, insofar as it lies within our power. But we should probably not try to make things perfect, especially not ourselves, for that path leads to mass graves. We're stuck with us, imperfect as we are; but we should make the most of us. Which is about as far as I myself am prepared to go, in real life, along the road to ustopia. (Atwood, "Dire Cartographies", p. 95)

[593] Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: St. Martins, 2007), p. 5. See also Brent Bellamy's and Imre Szeman's trenchant critique in "Life after People: Science Faction and Ecological Future", in: Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson, eds., *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), pp. 192-205.

However, I hope it is not too late to contradict Rosi Braidotti when she says that: “the animal has ceased to be one of the privileged terms that indexes the European subject’s relation to otherness”,[596] because without nonhuman animal others humans would be, in fact, “becoming animal” (but not in the sense Deleuze and Guattari desired), or “human-animaloid hybrids”, as Braidotti says.[597] They would simply be threatened with the same disappearance, the same ‘zombification’, as (nonhuman animals). In view of this post-postapocalyptic scenario, let me end with Jocelyn Porcher’s damning verdict of in vitro meat, to complete so to speak, the circle of life-death:

> La différence entre la viande issue d’un animal et la viande *in vitro*, c’est précisément cela: la vie. Entre les animaux et nous, la vie circule. La vie et la mort sont données. Nous savons d’où vient notre énergie vivante : elle vient de cette incorporation de la vie par la mort donnée. Dans le cas de la viande *in vitro*, il n’y a pas de mort, mais il n’y a pas non plus de vie. Il n’y a rien qui circule. Pas de vie, pas de mort, pas de don. Du mort-vivant.[598]

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[594] Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist Vegetarian Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

[595] Cf. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century [1985]”, in: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-181.

[596] Braidotti, “Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others”, *PMLA* 124.2 (2020): 526.

[597] *Ibid*.

[598] Porcher, *Vivre avec les animaux*, p. 126 (The difference between meat from an animal and in vitro meat is precisely that: life. Between animals and us, life circulates. Life and death are given. We know where our living energy comes from: it comes from this incorporation of life through giving death. In the case of in vitro meat, there is no death, but there is no life either. Nothing circulates. No life, no death, no gift. Living-dead.)

12 Microbes R Us – David Eagleman's *Sum*, Jim Crace's *Being Dead* and the Medical Humanities

> On a cell-by-cell basis (…) you are only 10 percent human. For the rest, you are microbial.[599]
>
> In short, all previous biology has been grossly zoomorphic.[600]
>
> On any possible, reasonable or fair criterion, bacteria are – and always have been – the dominant forms of life on Earth. Our failure to grasp this most evident of biological facts arises in part from the blindness of our arrogance but also, in large measure, as an effect of scale. We are so accustomed to viewing phenomena of our scale – sizes measured in feet and ages in decades – as typical of nature.[601]

The Microbial Turn

In his wonderful collection of scurrilous short stories, *Sum – Tales of the Afterlife*, the neuroscientist David Eagleman presents a number of scenarios and perspectives that could be called 'posthumanist' or 'postanthropocentric' in their intent to play with the established scalar cosmology which places humans between (divine or transcendent) infinity and the infinitesimal or the 'microbial'. One story in particular, entitled "Scales", spells out the irony of everything being "consumed by smaller scales":

> For a while we worried about a separation from God, but our fears were eased when the prophets revealed a new understanding: we are God's organs, His eyes and fingers, the means by which He explores His world. We all felt better about this deep sense of connection – we are a part of God's biology (…). But it slowly grew clearer that we have less to do with His sensory organs and more to do with His internal organs. The atheists and the theists agreed that it is only through us that He lives. When we abandon him, He dies. We felt honored at first to be the cells that form God's body, but then it became clearer that we are God's cancer (…). He has finally reached His peace with this and lies quietly in His bed at the convergence of green antiseptic corridors (…). Then He begins to notice something. While He cannot stop us or hurt us, there's something that can. He watches us turning to the smaller scales to battle our own leukemias, lymphomas, sarcomas, melanomas. He witnesses His subjects anointing themselves in chemotherapy, basking in the glow of radiation therapy. He watches His humans recklessly chewed up by the trillions of cells that constitute them (…). And God suddenly

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[599] Olivia Judson, "Microbes 'R' Us", *New York Times* (21 July 2009); available online at: http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/21/microbes-r-us/?_r=0 (accessed 10/01/2024).

[600] Dorion Sagan, *Cosmic Apprentice: Dispatches from the Edges of Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p.167.

[601] Stephen Jay Gould, "Planet of the Bacteria", *Washington Post Horizon* 119 (344): H1 (1996); available online at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/1996/11/13/planet-of-the-bacteria/6fb60f1d-e6fe-471e-8a0f-4cfa9373772c/ (accessed 10/01/2024).

> bolts up in His bed with a revelation: everything that creates itself upon the backs of smaller scales will by those same scales be consumed.[602]

Eagleman follows up on this 'new biology'[603], which comes with its own eschatology, with another story, simply entitled "Microbe", in which the cosmological scales have been reversed in the sense that "God is the size of a bacterium":

> There is no afterlife for us. Our bodies decompose upon death, and then the teeming floods of microbes living inside of us move on to better places. This may lead you to assume that God doesn't exist – but you'd be wrong. It's simply the He doesn't know *we* exist. He is unaware of us because we're at the wrong spatial scale. God is the size of a bacterium. He is not something outside and above us, but on the surface and in the cells of us. God created life in His own image; His congregations are the microbes.[604]

This thought experiment is topical in the sense that, in recent years, microbes, microorganisms and the 'microbial' in general have received quite a dramatic re-evaluation, as far as their role in the evolution and ecology of life are concerned. The result is that they have all but erased the distinction between human and nonhuman biology. One of the established science textbooks, *Microbiology: An Evolving Science*, stakes out its terrain in these new cosmological terms:

> Life on Earth began early in our planet's history with microscopic organisms, or microbes. Microbial life has since shaped our atmosphere, our geology, and the energy cycles of all ecosystems. A human body contains ten times as many microbes as it does human cells, including numerous tiny bacteria on the skin and in the digestive tract. Throughout history, humans have had a hidden partnership with microbes ranging from food production and preservation to mining for precious metals.[605]

Eagleman's little fable acknowledges the same shift by stating that: "The chronic warfare over host territory, the politics of symbiosis and infection, the ascendancy of strains: this is the chessboard of God, where good clashes with evil on the battleground of surface proteins and immunity and resistance. Our presence in this picture is something of an anomaly. Since we – the backgrounds upon which they live – don't harm the life patterns of the microbes, we are unnoticed. We are neither selected out by evolution nor captured in the microdeific radar".[606]

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[602] David Eagleman, *Sum – Tales from the Afterlives* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2010), pp. 34-35.

[603] The phrase 'the new biology' usually refers to work in theoretical biology that counters the traditional 'genocentric' approach prevalent in neo-Darwinian biology, which privileges natural selection and competition as a way to explain the emergence of new life forms. 'New biologists', by contrast, tend to look to the molecular level for 'creative acts' to take place and which point towards the idea of a 'symbiotic evolution' (for a brief overview see Manuela Rossini, "Bodies", in: Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 153-169.

[604] Eagleman, *Sum*, p. 54.

[605] Joan Slonczewski and John W. Foster, *Microbiology: An Evolving Science*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2009), p. 5.

[606] Eagleman, *Sum*, p. 54.

What Eagleman describes here is very much the essence of the new microbiology with its focus on symbiosis and (auto)immunity.[607] In doing so, it forms part of both the context of the rise of '(micro)biopolitics' and that of the posthumanist/postanthropocentric critique of evolutionary teleology:

> God and His microbial constituents are unaware of the rich social life that we have developed, of our cities, circuses, and wars – they are as unaware of our level of interaction as we are of theirs. Even while we genuflect and pray, it is only the microbes who are in the running for eternal punishment or reward. Our death is unnoteworthy and unobserved by the microbes, who merely redistribute onto different food sources. So although we supposed ourselves to be the apex of evolution, we are merely the nutritional substrate.[608]

Human entanglement with the microbial can thus be seen as yet another dent in 'our' human, or rather humanist, narcissism, human hubris, or the idea of human exceptionalism on which these are based. Instead the microbial turn underscores views put forward by many feminist (new) materialists (e.g. Luce Irigaray, Rosi Braidotti, Moira Gatens and Claire Colebrook) who argue for a new understanding of the relationship between humans and their bodies and their nonhuman environment by stressing the 'messiness' of complex materialities (or 'matter-realities', or indeed, 'corpo-realities'). The ethico-political aim that many other posthumanisms share with these new materialisms, which often emerge from a feminist base with a strong affinity to the materiality of difference, is to find more ecologically and socially just forms of inter- and 'intra-action',[609] by breaking down the idea of a strong autonomy between (human) self and (nonhuman) other, and by highlighting the co-constitution of the world by "biological, climatic, economic, and political forces".[610] In doing so they also critically inhabit the contemporary extension of global biopolitics into the infinitesimal realm of the microbial, and which one might thus call 'microbiopolitics'.

(Micro)Biopolitics, Critical Animal Studies and Posthumanism

The microbial level of life that inhabits every human and nonhuman animal (and indeed plant) as well their environments forms at once a connection with an ancestral past and a 'posthuman' future of life on this planet. It is therefore no wonder that microbes call up all kinds of biological and symbolic, as well as affective, psychological and 'immunological' reactions. Martin Rees, the eminent astronomer, for example listed the microbial both as one of the greatest "Post-2000 Threats", as well as one of the solutions to our current problems. In his *Our Final Century* he explains that: "We may not have to wait long before new kinds of synthetic microbes are being genetically engineered (…) [which could] help solve the world's energy and global warming crisis".[611] Taking the (bio)economic implications of this statement further, both Nikolas Rose and Melinda Cooper in their analyses of contemporary biopolitical society refer to the microbial as an essential aspect of 'biocapital' to be harnessed by the developing 'bioeconomy'.[612] Arguably, the recent focus on biopolitics, biotechnology and bioeconomy is part of a more general revaluation of our microbial other, namely from being the arch-enemy of modern medicine to becoming one of the main allies in posthumanist ethics and ecology.

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[607] Cf. Scott F. Gilbert and Alfred I. Tauber's ground-breaking article "A Symbiotic Way of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals", *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 87.4 (2012): 325-341.

[608] *Ibid*., pp. 54-55.

[609] Karen Barad's term, see her "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter", *Signs* 28.3 (2003): 801-31.

[610] Cf. Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures. Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 2. For the ethics of such posthumanist 'corpo-realities' see also Patricia MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

Microbes are, one could say, a true *pharmakon*[613] in that they represent both poison and remedy and thus contain an essential power that will need to be harnessed in a shift towards a postbiological, postevolutionary, technosynthetic bioeconomy that would be no longer based on a distinction between organic and inorganic matter, and which would also blur the distinction between artificial and biological forms of life. Within such a shift, microbes are understood as arguably the main form of 'biomedia', in that they promise to constitute the future interface between genetics and computing.[614] Harnessing the power of the microbial is thus vital both for current neoliberal biocapitalism and for any resistance to it. Consequently, the revaluation of microbial agency has also become a major force in the promotion of fields like animal studies and posthumanism with their common ambition to construct a postanthropocentric 'multispecies' ethics, politics and ecologies. It is in this context that some of the studies by new feminist materialism, posthumanism, and contemporary biophilosophy, as well as parallel developments within biomedicine and the medical humanities, have to be seen.

Re-evaluating the relationship between microbial and human agency, in terms of new feminist materialism (e.g. in the work of Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Myra Hird, Vicki Kirby, Jane Bennett and Elisabeth Wilson), is thought to lead to a 'relational ontology' that takes into account the "continuous process of materializing differences", and which shows that "humans are not only the result of ongoing material encounters but also that, in our human being, we are not separable from the 'environment' or other 'animals', including 'microbes'".[615] An acknowledgement of the interconnectedness between humans, animals, microbes and 'matter' in general is a form of 'worlding', as Denise Kimber Buell puts it: "thinking in terms of microbes keeps us thinking in terms of being in this world and accountable to it, rather than envisioning an escape from it".[616] Even though thinking about ourselves as "chimera at the cellular level"[617] might be somewhat unsettling, it might also lead to a more complex and ecological view of human-nonhuman-environments and their 'material' entanglement and thus, ultimately, put an end to the idea of human exceptionalism.

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[611] Martin Rees, *Our Final Century* (London: Heinemann, 2003), pp. 56-57.

[612] See the now 'classic' studies by Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) and Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), as well as Kaushik Sunder Rajan, *Biocapital: The Constitution of Post-Genomic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[613] Jacques Derrida's term, cf. his *Dissemination* (London: Continuum, 2004 [1972]).

[614] Cf. Eugene Thacker, *Biomedia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) and *After Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[615] Denise Kimber Buell, "The Microbes and Pneuma That I Am", in: Stephen D. Moore, ed., *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 64.

[616] *Ibid*., p. 82.

[617] *Ibid*., p. 85.

This means accepting, as illustrated in Eagleman's story, that microbes might be seen as the real 'heroes' of evolution, as the ancestors of nonhuman and human animals and "the origin of sociable life" in general.[618]

In this vein, Myra Hird begins her project of developing what she calls a "microontology" by quoting from Haraway's *When Species Meet*:

> I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become and adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to become with many.[619]

The companionate multi-species ethical, political and ecological conclusions that Hird draws from this entanglement of genes that gives rise to embodiment (the "enmeshing of bodies" that is the starting point of new feminist materialisms) is the demand for a "microontological" shift – or a shift in scale, one could say – in our understanding of the role of bacteria, following the incisive work of Lynn Margulis:

> Most organisms are bacteria: they evince the greatest organismal diversity, and have dominated evolutionary history. Bacteria invented all major forms of metabolism, multicellularity, nanotechnology, metallurgy, sensory and locomotive apparatuses (such as the wheel), reproductive strategies and community organization, light detection, alcohol, gas and mineral conversion, hypersex, and death.[620]

In this context of "symbiogenesis" (Margulis's term) it becomes highly problematic to speak of human (biological) identity, or indeed of the identity of any other species for that matter. This, initially, poses conceptual challenges to a field like animal studies; as seen in the list of microbial 'inventions' above; it also thoroughly problematises any ontological distinction between technology, biology and nature. The specific challenge that Hird's conclusion poses to critical animal studies is to widen its scale by going beyond its largely zoocentric approach and instead to zoom in on the smallest living species: "Our all-too-human insistent focus on biota 'big like us' obscures the rich diversity of living structures and processes through which the biota, including animals like us, thrive".[621] This insight also leads Hird to ask:

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[618] Cf. Myra J. Hird, "Meeting with the Microcosmos", *Environment and Planning D* 28 (2010): 36-39.
[619] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 3; quoted in Hird, "Meeting with the Microcosmos", p. 36.
[620] *Ibid*., pp. 36-7.
[621] *Ibid*., p. 37.

> How does our current concern with human – animal relations obscure bacterial intra-actions? Eating well[622] with bacteria, for instance, complicates animal rights discourse, vegetarianism and veganism. This task is indeed far ahead of us: we must somehow survive humanism, if we are to survive at all.[623]

Of course, this does not invalidate in any way the necessity of continuing to address (and further problematise) the very porous boundary between human and nonhuman animals. But it does provide a larger (posthumanist) framework that could help address the humanist residue (i.e. the problematic inversion of anthropocentrism) that underpins some animal studies approaches, which are usually based on problematic notions of 'advocacy', 'agency' and 'subjectivity'. It is therefore less than helpful to call Hird's microontology "ethically obscene" from an animal studies corner, or a form of "intellectual 'pornography'",[624] or indeed to refer to it as an attempt to "derail CAS and animal liberation's current focus on the creatures ensnared in the animal industrial complex (and those ravaged by human hubris in the form of habitat destruction, environmental devastation, and so on) in order to account for the existence and ethical claims of bacteria".[625] Animal liberation will be a hollow victory (if it really is an achievable goal, at all), if it left the humanist notion of subjectivity intact.

Hird's move towards a microontological scale (which is not to the exclusion of other, bigger, scales, of course) should therefore not be misunderstood as a further extension of 'advocacy', nor does she argue for microbes to be seen as in any way 'ethical subjects' (she is very well aware of the potentially harmful aspects of human/nonhuman-microbial entanglements). One should never forget that something like advocacy for something like microbial rights would be a very risky business indeed, as the editors of *Interspecies* explain for example, since bacteria are of course not only "companionate critters but also, significantly, 'incompanionate' pests (…), in other words, forms of life with which interspecies relating may not be so obvious or comfortable”.[626] But it is precisely the ‘pharmacological’ and ‘promethean’ ability of bacteria to produce, change and end life that makes them so important both ‘to think with’ (for posthumanism and animal studies) and ‘to instrumentalise and to industrialise’ (for biocapitalism). Animal studies and posthumanism should therefore ideally be seen as allies in problematising the notion of “bodies and their purported organic [or inorganic] boundedness”.[627]

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[622] A reference to Jacques Derrida's interview '"Eating Well", Or the Calculation of the Subject', in: *Points… Interviews 1974-1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 255-87.

[623] Hird, "Meeting with the Microcosmos", p. 38.

[624] See Zipporah Weisberg, "The Trouble With Posthumanism: Bacteria Are People Too", in: John Sorensen, ed., *Critical Animals Studies: Thinking the Unthinkable* (New York: Brown Bear Press, 2014), p. 109.

[625] *Ibid*. For a more detailed analysis and commentary on the ideological split between what might be called an 'abolitionist', animal rights and animal liberation approach within animal studies and a more philosophical theoretical (posthumanist) stance, taking its cue from Derridean deconstruction, see Cary Wolfe's *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) as well as his *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, esp. chapter 4). For a discussion of the value of the 'critical' in Critical Animal Studies see also the rationale of Helena Pedersen's book series "Critical Animal Studies", available online at: https://brill.com/display/serial/CAST (accessed 10/01/2024). The different politics that are at stake in this split is maybe best articulated by Richie Nimmo: "Crucially, a genuinely posthumanist politics is never just about seeking to transform human relations with non-human animals, however important this may be; it is always also about seeking ways to simultaneously transform our most fundamental relations with ourselves as human, changing how we see and experience ourselves and our relationship with the world – our mode of existence, our very way of being human" (Nimmo, "Apiculture in the Anthropocene: Between Posthumanism and Critical Animal Studies", in: Human Animal Research Network Editorial Collective, eds., *Animals in the Anthropocene: Critical Perspectives on Non-Human Futures* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2015), p. 194.

The New Microbiology and Symbiosis

Both critical posthumanism and critical animal studies take as their premise that human and nonhuman living entities are companion species to each other in a symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship that co-produces their world. Lynn Margulis’s thesis that symbiogenesis is the key to understanding the evolution of life took a long time to be acknowledged,[628] but under the conditions of contemporary biopolitics and computerised microbiology her focus on the role of bacteria for the evolution of more complex life forms provides the biophilosophical components that are required for a new imaginary both for a posthumanist ethics as well as biocapitalism. “Most evolution”, Margulis summarises in her late work, “occurred in those beings we dismiss as ‘microbial scum’”:

> All life, we now know, evolved from the smallest life-forms of all, bacteria. We need not welcome this fact. Microbes, especially bacteria, are touted as enemies and denigrated as germs. Microbes, in fact, are any live beings – algae, bacteria, yeast, and so forth – seen more accurately with a microscope than as smudges or scum with the naked eye. My claim is that, like all other apes, humans are not the work of God but of thousands of millions of years of interaction among highly responsive microbes. This view is unsettling to some. To some it is frightening news from science, a rejectable source of information. I find it fascinating: it spurs me to learn more.[629]

This new evolutionary view, which focuses on the microbial and its role in creating and sustaining all life, also leads to the notion of the “inextricable connectedness of all creatures on the planet, the beings now alive and all the numberless ones that came before”.[630] Biophilosophically, any anthropocentrism and humanism can be countered by the fact that “for all our elegance and eloquence as a species, for all our massive frontal lobes, for all our music, we have not progressed all that far from our microbial forbears. They are still with us, part of us. Or, put it another way, we are part of them”.[631] Most importantly, this insight into the firstness and persistence of microbes takes any teleology out of evolution that might be used to rank complex life forms over less complex ones. As Margulis and Sagan explain: “Far from leaving microorganisms behind on an evolutionary ‘ladder’, we are both surrounded by them and composed of them. Having survived in an unbroken line from the beginnings of life, all organisms today are equally evolved”.[632]

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[626] See Julie Livingston and Jasbir K. Puar, “Interspecies”, *Social Text* 106/29.1 (2011): 5.

[627] *Ibid*., p. 4.

[628] Cf. Bruce Clarke’s “Introduction: Earth, Life, and System”, in his edited collection *Earth, Life, and System: Evolution on a Gaian Planet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 1-12; as well as Dorion Sagan’s *Lynn Margulis: The Life and Legacy of a Scientific Rebel* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2012).

[629] Lynn Margulis, *The Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Phoenix Books, 1998), p. 5.

[630] Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Microcosmos: Four Billion Years of Evolution from Our Microbial Ancestors* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), p. 9.

[631] *Ibid*., p. 11.

Similarly, the other popular view of traditional evolution attributed to Darwin, namely the idea of the ‘survival of the fittest’, is here also challenged and replaced with “a new view of continual cooperation, strong interaction, and mutual dependence among life forms. Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking. Life forms multiplied and complexified by co-opting others, not just by killing them”.[633] Symbiogenesis – the ability of prokaryotes (organisms composed of cells without nucleus, i.e. bacteria) to transfer genetic material (i.e. mitochondria) into eukaryotes (all other life forms with cells that have a nucleus) – is a better explanation for the evolution of complex life than mere mutation and adaptation. Moreover, this symbiogenetic process is ongoing since: “Fully ten percent of our own dry body weight consists of bacteria, some of which, although they are not congenital part of our bodies, we can’t live without”.[634] The eco-biophilosophical and ethical conclusion that Margulis and Sagan draw from this new narrative are that entanglement, cooperation and networking are the most important characteristics of life and its evolution:

> We are part of an intricate network that comes from the original bacterial takeover of the earth. Our powers of intelligence and technology do not belong specifically to us but to all life. Since useful attributes are rarely discarded in evolution it is likely that our powers, derived from the microcosm, will endure in the microcosm. Intelligence and technology, incubated by humankind, are really the property of the microcosm. They may well survive our species in forms of the future that lie beyond our limited imaginations.[635]

This does should not only inspire humility within humans as a species, it in fact problematises the very category of species, human or other.[636] It also has profound consequences for the idea of individuality and (biological, as well as symbolic, cultural etc.) identity as such.

The new microbiology based on symbiogenesis has inevitably led to a ‘new medicine’ (and to the emergence of entirely new fields of knowledge that integrate developments within the life sciences and the humanities – cf. in particular the rise of the 'medical humanities').[637] As Dorion Sagan explains, the "medical model of the body-as-unity-to-be-preserved (…) is besieged by the new biology".[638] This new (micro)biology sees the body as 'chimerical' in that the "animal cell is seen to be a hybrid of bacterial species".[639] As a result, "the body can no longer be seen as single, unitary. It is multiple, even if orchestrated by vicissitudes and the need for harmony over evolutionary time. We are all multiple beings".[640] The ethical and medical consequence of being-multiple is therefore far-reaching: "If the body-brain is not single but the mixed result of multiple bacterial lineages, then health is less a matter of defending a unity than maintaining an ecology".[641]

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[632] *Ibid*., p. 14.

[633] *Ibid*., p. 15.

[634] *Ibid*., p. 19.

[635] *Ibid*., p. 22.

[636] The major challenge that the new (micro)biology referred to above poses to traditional post-Darwinian models of evolution, and which, in turn, problematises the very notion of species, lies in the “extent and promiscuity of lateral gene transfer and the difficulties this raises for defining a ‘tree’ of life, the importance of symbiosis and cooperation, and the reinstatement of the group [or species; SH] as an important – perhaps the most important – unit of selection are all problematic”, as Maureen A.O’Malley and John Dupré explain, in: “Towards a Philosophy of Microbiology”, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 28 (2007): 777-8. Malley and Dupré are also quoted in Thiago Hutter et al., “Being Human Is a Gut Feeling”, *Microbiome* 3.9 (2015): 1 (further discussed below), who conclude their argument with the statement: “Insofar as biological research is concerned, to be human is to be multispecies”.

In terms of posthumanism, animal studies and biopolitics, these insights from the new microbiology and from the biophilosophy it underpins can be placed in connection with two concepts that are at the centre of the discussion within the medical humanities, namely the microbiome and the problem of autoimmunity.

Microbiome and Autoimmunity

The changes that have thus been underway in the new microbiology in the last few decades have been described as a paradigm shift: "Animals and plants can no longer be considered individuals, but rather, all are holobionts consisting of the host and diverse symbiotic microorganisms. During the last two decades, numerous studies have demonstrated that these symbionts play a critical role in the physiology of all holobionts including metabolism, behaviour, development, adaptation, and evolution".[642] More recently the bioscientific focus has shifted towards the notion of 'microbiome', which is another sign of medicine moving away from seeing organisms as autonomous entities and towards an understanding of human and animal bodies as human-nonhuman-environmental 'ecosystems' or even as some kind of '(bio)social networks'. The resulting focus on 'assemblages' in fact can be said to constitute a view of an organism as a specific 'biotope', which in turn can be used to identify and understand the specific history of a particular organism. A microbiome even outlasts the death of 'its' organism, which raises new biological, ecological and therefore also ethical and political questions about cohabitation, interface, as well as (auto)immunity.[643]

The *OED* defines 'microbiome' (first used in 1952) as "a population of microorganisms inhabiting a specific environment; a microbial community of ecosystem, now esp. that of the body". It adds a second usage: "The collective genomes of all the microorganisms inhabiting a specific environment, esp. that of the body". Further 'symptoms' of the outlined revaluation of the microbial and the new focus on the microbiome in science are initiatives like the Human Microbiome Project (since 2007) – an extension of the Human Genome Project – as well as the foundation of a medical journal dedicated entirely to the microbiome. Almost ten years ago, *Microbiome* published an article entitled "Being Human is a Gut Feeling", which summarised the premises of microbiome studies as part of the new (micro)biology of entanglement:

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[637] See also my "Biohumanities", in: Daniel Sands, ed., *Bioethics and the Posthumanities* (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 67-76.

[638] Dorion Sagan, *Cosmic Apprentice*, p. 167.

[639] *Ibid*., p. 168.

[640] *Ibid*., p. 173.

[641] *Ibid*.

[642] Eugene Rosenberg and Ilana Zilber-Rosenberg, *The Hologenome Concept: Human, Animal and Plant Microbiota* (Cham: Springer, 2013), p. vii.

[643] For a more recent and critical overview see Jamie Lorimer, "Gut Buddies: Multispecies Studies and the Microbiome", *Environmental Humanities* 8.1 (2016): 57-76, as well as Lorimer's *The Probiotic Planet: Using Life to Manage Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020). See also the special issue of *Antennae* (2022) on "Microbial Ecologies", edited by Goivanni Aloi and Ken Rinaldo.

> With respect to most biological research projects, human beings are so well integrated with their microbiomes that the individuality of human beings is better conceived as a symbiotic entity. Insofar as biological research is concerned, to be human is to be multispecies.[644]

The (medical, ethical, ecological, political etc.) conclusions that may be drawn from this symbiotic state are that there is something like a 'common fate', or that indeed 'Microbes R Us': "being a human biological individual is to be a community of *Homo sapiens* and microbial symbionts whose degree of functional integration (and degree of individuality) is a function of the potential of that community to persist and evolve as a whole".[645] In terms of evolution and speciation this means that "it is the sum of an organism's genome and microbiome – the hologenome – and the processes they make possible that are linked by a common evolutionary fate (extinction, speciation) and selected together as a whole".[646] It is hardly a coincidence that these scientific authors conclude their short commentary by quoting Walt Whitman's famous 'proto-ecological' line "I am large, I contain multitudes" (from his *Song of Myself*).

The fallout of this biological problematisation of any strong notion of (species) identity, which more or less coincides with similar tenets in cultural theory and philosophy from the 1970s onwards (notably in poststructuralism and postmodernism, and now posthumanism as well as critical animal studies) points towards an increasing convergence between certain sectors of science and the humanities of which the medical humanities are maybe the most important variant. The common denominator here is usually the ethico-ecological implications of a problematised or entangled identity for both humans and nonhumans and their environments. "Our microbes, ourselves" thus becomes the slogan for a number of interventions in science news and popular science articles.[647]

The second implication of this shift from biological individuality/identity towards multispecies community is the reassessment of what may be called the 'immunitarian' paradigm. Microbiology – in many ways the modern science *par excellence* – understands itself as "the study of the microorganisms associated with a particular disease, habitat, etc." (*OED*). Its function has been a policing of the porous boundaries of human and animal organisms and bodies, in the identification of pathogens and studying and assisting (auto)immunitarian processes. It is thus both a reflection of and a force within modern biopolitics.[648] However, the immunitarian or defensive focus is now receiving many qualifications as a result of the more 'ecological' view of life in the new microbiology and the 'posthumanities' (of which the medial humanities can be said to be one branch).

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[644] Thiago Hutter et al., "Being human is a gut feeling", *Microbiome* 3.9 (2015): 1.

[645] *Ibid*., pp. 2-3.

[646] *Ibid*., p. 4.

[647] Cf. for example Alexandra Goho, "Our microbes, ourselves", *Science News* 171.20 (2007): 314-316; David Cameron, "Our microbes, ourselves" (2012); available online at: https://hms.harvard.edu/news/our-microbes-ourselves (accessed 10/01/2024); *Economist,* "The human microbiome: me, myself, us" (18 August 2012); online edition available at: https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2012/08/18/me-myself-us (accessed 10/01/2024); and Jennifer Ackerman, "Your Inner Ecosystem", *Scientific American* 306.6 (June 2012): 20-27.

The boundaries of bodies have been redrawn both internally and externally, one might say. Human or nonhuman animal cells within any species are vastly outnumbered by 'foreign' cells only that most of these are not really foreign at all but have been in symbiosis with that specific species for a long time. In most cases, they have been passed on and evolved with and through generations. The immunitarian fight of modern microbiology-based medicine against bacteria and 'germs' under these circumstances is now seen as much more ambiguous, esp. in the context of the dramatic rise of autoimmunitarian diseases particularly in 'ultra-hygienic' Western cultures with a high use of antibiotics (and an increasing resistance to them as a result). One of the main fears that arises under these circumstances is articulated thus: "Are we losing the bacteria we have coevolved with? If that is the case, then this is yet further evidence supporting the idea that the loss of good bacteria is partly to blame for the increased rates of autoimmunity that we are now seeing".[649]

Ecology, so to speak, has become a problem not only of the environment but of the body, and of the 'interior', as such. In "Your Inner Ecosystem", Jennifer Ackerman refers to the "balancing act between the microbiome and human immune cells that has taken some 200,000 years to calibrate": "Over the eons the immune system has evolved numerous checks and balances that generally prevent it from becoming either too aggressive (and attacking its own tissue) or too lax (and failing to recognize dangerous pathogens)".[650]

Autoimmunity – and the problematisation of the notions of 'self' and 'other' (or non-self) on which it presupposes – as a consequence has become another shared concern between the new microbiology, cultural theory and the posthumanities.[651] As Thomas Pradeu explains, the question of "what makes the identity of a living thing" has always been at the heart of immunology.[652] The 'uniqueness' and 'individuality' on which the classic definition of self and non-self are based, and which as a result of the microbial turn in the life sciences (and corresponding 'nonhuman' turns in the new or posthumanities) are contested by the new symbiogenetic approach. This is particularly visible in the politicisation of the notion of ‘contagion’:

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[648] Cf. Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[649] David Cameron, "Our microbes, ourselves", n.p.

[650] Ackerman, "Your Inner Ecosystem", p. 26.

[651] Cf. the discussion initiated by Jacques Derrida in, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides. A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida", in: Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 85-136; followed up by Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); and Timothy Campbell, *Improper Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). See also Stefan Herbrechter and Michelle Jamieson, eds., *Autoimmunities* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[652] Thomas Pradeu, *The Limits of the Self: Immunology and Biological Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 1.

> [T]he politics of viral [or microbial] containment relentlessly plays upon the contingency of the human ‘we’. It conceptually and materially confounds our understanding both of how individuals constitute our collectives and of how we exclude other collectivities that might not belong to them – whether these ‘others’ are individuals, other populations, other species, or other non-vital entities, such as [microbes].[653]

It is worth recalling once again, however, that the political context in which all of this is happening, is the global biocapitalist politics of life and death. The microbial dimension and our common dependence on it, like a *pharmakon*, acts both as poison and cure, while contagion is both the worst nightmare and absolute necessity:

> The microbial is not only a terrifying means of death (given its invisible nature) but also a killing of death itself, in the putrid obfuscation of contagion. Contagion becomes neither death nor life but protracted life, a state of never quite being dead – an undeadness not of the living dead but of dead living (…). Contagion forces life and death into the same generative slime.[654]

Medical Humanities and Being Dead

A good illustration of this “slimy” contagious state of “dead living” that provides the substrate for all life on Earth, from single cell to complex human-nonhuman animal and plant life, can be seen at work in Jim Crace’s novel *Being Dead*.[655] Its main protagonists are dead almost from the start. The decomposition process of the couple of retired zoologists who are brutally killed at exactly the place where they began their respective PhDs, doing fieldwork on the seashore, forms the background for the 'quivering' or wake during which the narrator provides flashbacks of their lives while graphically, with almost scientific detachment, describing their bodies' process of decay. In doing so, the novel forms what might be called a 'medi-fictional' commentary on the "great bacterial takeover"[656] after the death of the host organism. As Anna Williams writes in the *New Scientist*: "Millions want you dead (…). The cells in your body are outnumbered 10 to one by microbial cells, and like it or not, eventually the microbes will win". She reports on what scientists have named the 'thanatomicrobiome' – "the army of gut microbes that take over your internal organs once you are dead (…). While we are alive, the 100 trillion bacteria resident in our gut work on our behalf. They ease digestion and keep the immune system functioning smoothly, in exchange for a constant supply of food (…). After we die, however, our gut flora have a party".[657]

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[653] Ed Cohen, “The Paradoxical Politics of Viral Containment; or, How Scale Undoes Us One and All”, *Social Text* 106/29.1 (2011): 15-16.

[654] Ben Woodward, *Slime Dynamics* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012), p. 19.

[655] Since the original version of this chapter was written (in 2015-2016; published as “Microbes”, in: Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach and Ron Broglio, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 354-366) literary criticism has picked up on *Being Dead* in a number of complementary readings. The earliest, by Jim Byatt, “‘From Zoo. To Bot.’: (De)Composition on Jim Crace’s *Being Dead*”, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 25.2-3 (2014): 247-263),sees the novel as a celebration of “grotesque realism” à la Rabelais and Bahktin (p. 262). Sarah Bezan provides a first detailed feminist new materialist and Deleuzian neo-vitalist reading, in “Necro-Eco: The Ecology of Death in Jim Crace’s *Being Dead*”, *Mosaic* 48.3 (2015): 191-207. Bezan describes her approach as “necro-ecological” in the sense that the narrative of *Being Dead* “continually affirms the organic relations of decomposition as a radical mode or condition of being that extends beyond the moment of death itself” (p. 191). In 2018, three further substantial readings of the novel appeared: Diletta De Cristofaro, “‘False patters out of chaos’: Writing Beyond the Sense of an Ending in *Being Dead* and *The Pesthouse*”; Ivan Callus and Sandro Lanfranco, “A Different Kind of Wilderness: Decomposition and Life in Jim Crace’s *Being Dead*”; and Sebastian Groes, “Thinking Crace: Consciousness and Cognition in Jim Crace’s *Quarantine* and *Being Dead*”, all three in: Katy Shaw and Kate Aughterson, eds., *Jim Crace: Into the Wilderness* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer, 2018), pp. 65-79, 81-94 and 149-164 respectively. The most recent addition as far as I am aware, to these readings, all of whom in different ways focus on decomposition as the novel’s central aspect, is Nicky Gardiner’s “Hopeless Necromantics: Decomposition and Transcorporeal Love in Jim Crace’s *Being Dead*”, in: Yvonne Liebermann, Judith Rahn and Bettina Burger, eds., *Nonhuman Agencies in the*

The novel meticulously, graphically, morbidly, one might even say, but, most importantly, without moralising, celebrates this "party", one might say, and follows the evolutionary unravelling of the two corpses as their "everending days of being dead"[658] coincide with new forms of symbiogenesis:

Twenty-First-Century Anglophone Novel (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer, 2021), pp.147-166. However, I want to single out Marco Caracciolo's and Shannon Lambert's, "Narrative Bodies and Nonhuman Transformations", *SubStance* 48.3 (2019): 45-63, since it uses *Being Dead* to illustrate "how narrative, and particularly creative narrative in the genre of the novel, can respond to our environmental crisis by imagining how human or human-like bodies bleed and fade into the nonhuman world" (46) – a view of 'solidarity with the nonhuman' that clearly complements the one I propose in this chapter and indeed the entire volume, however which focuses more narrowly on some narratological aspects. Caracciolo and Lambert use *Being Dead* as an example of the third of their investigated "nonhuman transformation motifs" in nonhuman narratives or narratives of the nonhuman, namely, unravelling (the other two being metamorphosis and blending). They claim that unravelling "causes an irreversible breakdown of the phenomenological body, via the vanishing of the conscious awareness that underlies organismic forms of embodiment; only embodiment in the transcorporeal sense remains" (p. 58). It is a form of fictional unravelling that addresses the question of what "we will see when the human becomes invisible, when 'we' disappear?" and stages "imaginative transformations" in the context of "our current ecological predicament" (p. 61). The quotation from Gilles Deleuze's, "Letter to a Harsh Critic", in: *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 3-12), cited by Caracciolo and Lambert is an excellent find in this respect and is worth repeating here, since it is a neat explanation of the ethical motivation behind any posthumanist/postanthropocentric reminder of our shared biological condition:

> It is not a question of being this or that sort of human, but of becoming inhuman, of a universal animal becoming – not seeing yourself as some dumb animal, but *unravelling your body's human organization* exploring this or that zone of bodily intensity, with everyone discovering their own particular zones, and the groups, populations, species that inhabit them. (Deleuze, p. 11; quoted in Carraciolo and Lambert, p. 49; the italics are Caracciolo's and Lambert's).

[656] Anna Williams, "Death: the great bacterial takeover", *New Scientist* (30 August 2014): N.p.; available online at: https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22329842-500-your-death-microbiome-could-catch-your-killer/ (accessed 12/01/2024).

[657] *Ibid*.

[658] Jim Crace, *Being Dead* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 210.

> By final light on the ninth day since the murder all traces of any life and love that had been split had disappeared. The natural world had flooded back. The brightness of the universe returned. If there was any blood left from Joseph and Celice's short stay in the dunes then it could only help to fortify the living murmur of the grass.[659]

One might thus read *Being Dead* as fiction's take on a posthumanist ethics mindful of the described microbial symbiotic eco-ontological turn. What otherwise could be seen as a very humanist *memento mori* moment thus becomes something much less anthropocentric. For a "biophilosophy of the 21st century", as Eugene Thacker contends, "life = multiplicity".[660] Individual human or nonhuman animal bodies, or indeed, plants, are not (or at least not only – and this is the important qualification) singular subjects but are also irreducibly entangled in their past, present and future environments. Arguably the most influential of these environments might prove to be not the cultural or technical, as many *trans*humanists would contend, but the microbial one. This has huge implications for everything from medicine to politics and concerns animal studies as much as every other posthumanist/postanthropocentric venture, as well as any current or future formations within the post- or biohumanities and biosciences.

Tracing the history of human and nonhuman animal relations to microbes on an interdisciplinary map, locating various instantiations in biology, literature/culture and theory/philosophy, this chapter is therefore meant as a contribution to an emerging cosmopolitics,[661] which is based on the vulnerability and multiplicity of life regardless of species belonging. As a figure of thought, microbes are relevant for critical posthumanism and critical animal studies in their reconceptualising of subjectivity and what it means to be 'human et al.' It is important to stress once again, however, that such a revaluation of our animal and microbial state of co-existence does not represent an uncritical argument for ontological indistinctness between humans and all other creatures. Our evolution through, and our symbiogenesis with, microbes, who are obviously not only friendly but more often lead to a rather deadly form of 'co-habitation', is a historical and social fact that as human beings we need to learn to live with – emotionally, ethically, pragmatically, but, of course, most important, critically.

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[659] *Ibid*., p. 209.

[660] Cf. Eugene Thacker, "Biophilosophy for the 21st Century (2005)", Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, eds., *1000 Days of Theory*; available online at: https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14452 (accessed 10/01/2024).

[661] Cf. Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics*, 2 vols (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010-2011).

13 Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and *Zero K* as 'Posthumanist Literature'

> [T]he novel is one of the most powerful and inventive critical tools we have with which to address the emerging conditions of a new being in the world.[662]

Literature, Posthumanism and the Posthuman

> Is [the posthuman] a utopian aspiration, a cautionary critique, an evolutionary end-point? Is the posthuman era upon us, or must it remain a permanent possibility, forever just out of reach?[663]

Posthumanism, as a critical discourse,[664] is best understood as the ongoing 'deconstruction of humanism'.[665] It challenges the anthropocentrism and exceptionalism on which humanism is based. The figure of the posthuman (cyborgs, AI, but also earlier (monstrous) nonhuman others like zombies, chimeras, aliens etc.) are signs that legitimating human dominance over everything else on this planet comes at a price. All those nonhuman others against which humanism defines 'human nature' come back to haunt it, especially today, at a time of planetary challenges and ambient fears of extinction.[666] Posthumanism and the posthuman are therefore not new, they have been humanism's constant companions. They express and force us to engage with humanism's worst nightmares but also its deepest desires, at a time, when what it means to be human is less certain than ever.

Fiction – and the novel more specifically – as a speculative discourse, plays a privileged role in this: fears and desires are 'imaginary' in the sense that they have the inherent capacity to provoke imaginings of other realities (including alternative, nonhuman-centred ones) based on a (more or less) critical understanding of existing worlds. The novel's relation with posthumanism is thus originary and generative, as a look at the contents table of *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* with its contributions ranging from the periods of 'Medieval' to 'Postmodern' and genres from 'Autobiography' to 'Science Fiction' and its themes from 'Objects' to 'Futures' demonstrates.[667] In order to tap into the critical potential of posthumanist discourse and the figure of the posthuman it is therefore more productive to see them as appearing 'across the ages'. Seen in this context, the age-old idea that humans wish to overcome what they think they are, in the 21st century reaches a new, intensified, phase driven by nano-, info-, neuro- and biotechnologies on the one hand, and climate change, loss of biodiversity and extinction threats, on the other hand. This would justify speaking of (some) contemporary literature as a 'literature of the posthuman', in the sense that it faces a situation ‘in which the human itself can only be contemplated from elsewhere, from some posthuman perspective’.[668]

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[662] Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First –Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 14.

[663] Paul Sheehan, "Posthuman Bodies", in: David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 245.

[664] See Stefan Herbrechter, Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[665] Neil Badmington, ed., *Posthumanism* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000).

[666] Cf. Claire Colebrook, ed. *Extinction* (Living Books About Life, 2012); available online at: http://livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Extinction (last accessed 18/12/2023).

[667] Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

With reference to this kind of contemporary literature most readers would probably expect to hear more about the *contemporary* proliferation of ‘posthuman bodies’ (from androids to cyborgs to clones) and literary reactions to ‘the specifically technological outcomes of thinking through and beyond the human’ and ‘human perfectibility’.[669] However, the ‘posthumanisation’ of the (human and nonhuman animal) body is only *one* important interest in contemporary literature informed by ‘a posthuman becoming of unlimited desire’.[670] There are questions raised by contemporary fiction that are at least as important as ‘technological posthumanism’, with its mutating, cloned techno-bodies and their threat or promise of informational dematerialisation and mediatisation. That does not mean of course that Paul Sheehan is wrong in seeing a parallel between the novel’s contemporary ‘post-generic’ plasticity and the transformative potential of posthuman bodies.[671]

A somewhat more ambivalent approach, however, can be extracted from Peter Boxall’s work. In his ‘Science, Technology, and the Posthuman’, Boxall begins with the following statement: “It is one of the peculiar contradictions of modernity that the technology that extends the reach of the human, that helps humans to master their environment, also works to weaken the human itself as a category”.[672] This peculiar dialectic finds its logical conclusion in the “current environmental crisis that threatens our planet”; it is a sign that the “technology that has allowed humankind to control the planet has also made it inhospitable to humans, and to all other species”.[673] The double-edged sword of technological extension (and originary technicity)[674] of humans is what Boxall traces as the fundamental built-in posthuman logic. Its effect is that “technology amplifies the human only to the extent that it dwarfs it” and which testifies to the “emergence of a posthuman structure of feeling at work” in post-war fiction:

> The development of the novel in the period [since 1945] is arguably characterised by the lapsing of the human as the dominant figure for civilised life, and the emergence of a posthuman rhetoric and aesthetic, which shares much with the other postal compounds that shape cultural life in the later decades of the century – such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and so on. [675]

By entering in a phase of accelerated technological transformation the novel’s choice seems to be one between resistance, or a defense of the natural body, and the embrace of a

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[668] Peter Boxall, “Science, Technology, and the Posthuman”, in: James, David, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 127.

[669] Sheehan, “Posthuman Bodies”, p. 245.

[670] *Ibid*., p. 250.

[671] Sheehan identifies four current forms of posthuman bodies as “post-generic archetypes” appearing in contemporary fiction: the cybernetic body (e.g. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*), the cloned body (*Never Let Me Go*), the cannibal body (*The Road*) and the zombie body (*Zone One*).

[672] Boxall, “Science, Technology, and the Posthuman”, p. 127.

[673] *Ibid*.

[674] Cf. Arthur Bradley, *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2011).

[675] Boxall, “Science, Technology, and the Posthuman”, p. 130.

"postnatural body" (i.e. a tension or "splitting between a residual, natural human and a technologically produced posthuman", as Boxall argues.[676]

This posthumanisation process – accompanied and driven by neoliberal, technoscientific globalisation – does not go uncontested, however, as Boxall already noted in his *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* where he traced a "profound disjunction between our real, material environments and the new technological, political and aesthetic forms in which our global relations are being conducted".[677] Posthumanism can thus be seen as the ideological battleground of an underlying political, economic, technological etc. process (that I would call (globalised) 'posthumanisation') that provokes the ambient return of realism and the desire to grasp the texture of the contemporary real:

> There is, in the fiction of the new century, as well as in the very wide range of other disciplines and intellectual networks, a strikingly new attention to the nature of our reality – its materiality, its relation to touch, to narrative and to visuality (…) one can see the emergence of new kinds of realism, a new set of formal mechanisms with which to capture the real, as it offers itself as the material substrate of our being in the world.[678]

Closely related to this turn towards what might be called a new 'speculative' realism is the realisation of a "deep and far-reaching crisis in our understanding of the limits of the human" and a "fascination with the shifting boundary between the human and the nonhuman, and with the ethical, political and cultural challenges that such transformations represent", Boxall writes.[679]

Don DeLillo

> Extinction was a current theme of his.[680]

Following on from this brief summary of Peter Boxall's compelling evaluation of contemporary literature, I am specifically interested in the role Don DeLillo's work plays in Boxall's argument. DeLillo's later novels (from *Underworld* (1987) onwards) have been reflecting themes that are often associated with posthumanism: digitalisation, embodiment, globalisation, terrorism, artificial intelligence and climate change. In his most recent novel, *Zero K*, DeLillo however, engages with the *question* of (a certain understanding of) posthumanism as such.

DeLillo's work from the 1971 *Americana* to the 1997 *Underworld* is described by Boxall as "a narrative frame for the running out of late twentieth-century time".[681] Interestingly, while *Underworld* is read by Boxall as "a narrative form in which a late historical condition might recognize itself", DeLillo's "post-apocalyptic" novels of the twenty-first century, from *The Body Artist* onwards, "speak an extraordinary lack of spatial or temporal awareness, a sudden drastic failure of the bonds that hold us in time and space".[682] Instead, they suggest a new technological-economic complex, with *Point Omega* and *The Body Artist* in particular "set in this peculiarly slowed, stalled time".[683] Boxall continues by claiming that DeLillo's first novels of the twenty-first century (i.e. after 9/11) "are written in a strikingly new spirit, a suddenly sparse, late style which displays an extraordinary historical disorientation",[684] which leads him to conclude that DeLillo might be a kind of test case for the transition from late postmodernism to an entirely new sense of time characterised by the "unbound chronology of a new century, in which narrative itself is uncertain of its co-ordinates, and in which the technological and political forces which govern the passing of time become strange, new and unreadable".[685] DeLillo's late work is thus both symptom and critique of this change and, as a writer, DeLillo is here positioned both as *against* and synchronous *with* his time. This makes him part of a generation of writers who, in their "late post-2000 phase" more or less critically accompany the transition from late postmodernism to a new experience of time and space provided by socio-economic globalisation and media-technological digitalisation, which, for the sake of convenience, one might call "posthumanist". It is in this way that DeLillo's late work can be said to continue to "wrestle with the task of finding a politically relevant role for literature".[686]

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[676] *Ibid*., p. 131.
[677] Boxall, *Twenty-First –Century Fiction*, p. 9.
[678] *Ibid*., p. 10.
[679] *Ibid*., pp. 12-13.
[680] Don DeLillo, Don. *Point Omega* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 25.
[681] Boxall, *Twenty-First –Century Fiction*, p 25.

Already in 2006, DeLillo had played a key role for Boxall in articulating this transition beyond postmodernism, in *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*. In the face of "an extended enactment of the exhaustion of possibility in post-war culture" and a "colonised, post-apocalyptic future",[687] DeLillo's novels, Boxall argued, "posit a world in which the nonexistant, the unnameable, the unthinkable, have been eradicated; in which cultural truth is disseminated by the forces of a globalised capital from which there is no escape".[688] So, even if, through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, "DeLillo's fiction is organised around the possibility of a historical counterfunction, of a counternarratrive that might preserve a radical revolutionary spirit', Boxall claims that 'possibility' is thus kept alive in the 'thin air of the 'end of history'".[689] In this sense, DeLillo's fiction is not simply "an enactment of the exhaustion of [historical] possibility",[690] but, in Boxall's view, it is rather "at once a critique and an enactment of the possibility of fiction in the post-war" period as such, underpinned by an unnameable longing or "yearning for something that is missing", or, as one might argue, the "unrealised" in history,

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[682] *Ibid*., p. 27.

[683] *Ibid*. On the issue of timescapes, the "expansion of temporal scales" and the "limits of temporality" in DeLillo's post 9/11 novels see also James Gourley, *Terrorism and Temporality in the Works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 85-94, and David Watson, "Vanishing Points; or, the Timescapes of the Contemporary Novel", *Studia Neophilologica* 88.sup 1 (2016): 57-67.

[684] Boxall, *Twenty-First –Century Fiction*, p. 28.

[685] *Ibid*., pp. 29-30. On the question of DeLillo's 'late style' see Aine Mahon and Fergal McHugh, "Lateness and the Inhospitable in Stanley Cavell and Don DeLillo", *Philosophy and Literature* 40.2 (2016): 446-464; Matthew Shipe, "War as Haiku: The Politics of Don DeLillo's Late Style", *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon* 4.2 (2016): 1-23; and Laura Bieger, "Say the Words: Reading for Cohesion in Don DeLillo's Novel *Point Omega*". *Narrative* 26.1 (2018): 1-16.

[686] Frida Beckman, "Cartographies of ambivalence: allegory and cognitive mapping in Don DeLillo's later novels", *Textual Practice* 32.8 (2018): 1385.

[687] Peter Boxall Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 4.

[688] *Ibid*., p. 5.

[689] *Ibid*.

[690] *Ibid*., p. 8.

"which allows thought and history to persist".[691] However, while this places DeLillo's work at a critical angle to the general understanding of what postmodernism is or was, it also positions him at a critical distance to what is generally understood by the posthuman (if not posthumanism), namely the progressive (techno-utopian) displacement or replacement of the human by media and technology. Instead, as Boxall argues, the dogged insistence on, or the preservation of "the possibility of fiction", that characterises DeLillo's work, is indeed achieved through a critical shadowing of techno-media history or "the slow passage from the mimeograph, through the telex machine, to email and the internet", which suggests that "the mediation of the culture is not yet total, that there are other histories that can be written and imagined, unrealised possibilities that remain dormant in the culture, unthought, and offline".[692]

In turning towards narrating the accelerated and intensifying posthumanisation occurring in 'late' (postmodernist, posthumanist, contemporary) culture, DeLillo thus finds a new role for literature, the writer of fiction and the literary critic in the new (21st) century. As I would like to argue, this role is that of a *critical* posthumanist, or, a critical observer of the current redefinition of the human (and its limits) and what this might mean as far as the possibility of fiction and its survival are concerned. DeLillo says as much in his reaction to 9/11, in his interview "In the ruins of the future", where he criticises what he calls "the utopian glow of cyber-capital" with its belief that "[t]echnology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet".[693] DeLillo here sees a (*neo*humanist, or rehumanising) task for the writer of fiction in providing a counternarrative to the combination of posthumanising technology and its associated forms of 'nostalgic' terrorism to rise from 'the ruins of the future'. This neohumanist counternarrative in the face of technology and terrorism, however, has been at the heart of DeLillo's oeuvre for a much longer time, as Joseph Tabbi demonstrated (already in 1995): "Technology pervades the most ordinary existence, and by integrating technology into his narrative, DeLillo carries his fiction beyond the limits of a mere literary experimentation to what we might call a postmodern [or, one could say, posthumanist] or conceptual naturalism".[694] Tabbi here understands 'naturalism' in the sense that "the novelist comes to share most deeply in the technological culture by (…) being receptive to the expressive power in its products and so bringing these otherwise mute forms into the realms of language, symbol and metaphor.[695] Taking this further, one could thus argue that the post-postmodern, posthumanist, writer "*construct*[s] a truth by actively perceiving a narrative form in material that is real but not itself linguistic", Tabbi suggests.[696]

Point Omega *and* Zero K – *A 'Posthumanist Reading'*[697]

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[691] *Ibid*., p. 15.

[692] *Ibid*., pp. 6-7.

[693] Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September", *The Guardian* (22 December 2001); available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo (last accessed 18/12/2023).

[694] Joseph Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 174.

[695] *Ibid*., p. 185.

[696] *Ibid*.

[697] Cf. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, "What is a posthumanist reading?" *Angelaki* 13.1 (2008): 95-111.

> At this point in the twenty-first century, it has become difficult to take up the topic of temporality in contemporary fiction without reference to the geological concept of the Anthropocene.[698]

The best way to understand *contemporary* literature and culture as posthumanist, in my view, is to see it as an emerging paradigm in which what it means to be human is again subject to radical changes, partly due to technological development but also because of changing environmental conditions brought about by humans themselves.[699] It is an ontological, epistemological and ecological crisis that could lead either to radical extinction and ecocide or total control through technological 'enhancement' and 'geoengineering'. This is the major faultline between posthumanists and transhumanists with their different ideologies, strategies and constructions of the future. In terms of recent developments in (critical and cultural) theory, this is reflected in the various positions with regard to posthumanism's immediate predecessors – poststructuralism and postmodernism – and their 'de-centring' of the (human) subject. If regarded through the lens of continuity with previous 'post' movements, *post*humanism could be understood as another, more radical phase in this decentring process of the human, or even as the most radical 'turn' in theory yet – i.e. the 'nonhuman turn'[700]– which is based on the notion that 'postanthropocentrism' is to be taken seriously. However, for those who see the decentring of the (human) subject in a more sceptical or negative way – an offense to human dignity and solidarity – postanthropocentrism is certainly a turn too far, which explains the numerous 'returns', backlashes and *neo*humanist tendencies that also characterise the first decades of the 21st century. Accompanying and increasingly overtaking this ideologically framed discussion are *trans*humanist trends that, in fact, just press ahead with human self-substitution, which they characterise as the evolutionary 'next stage' (usually the advent of strong AI), informed as they are by the belief that technology can somehow save 'us' (even without a proper consideration of what this 'us' might be). This, arguably, is the complex social and political context in which DeLillo's more recent work, and especially *Point Omega* and *Zero K.*, have to be read.

Kate Marshall begins her inquiry into what she refers to as the "novels of the Anthropocene" with a quotation from DeLillo's *Point Omega* that sets the scene for such a reading: "Do we have to be humans forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to the inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field"[701] The character, Richard Elster, who speaks these words is a disaffected 'metaphysician' and former Bush government war 'ideologue' specialising in the question of (extraordinary) 'rendition'.[702] He finds himself in a desert retreat with a filmmaker who wants to shoot a documentary about him. Marshall includes *Point Omega* among a number of "new novels of a newly self-aware geological period" that may be referred to as "speculative fiction" and which correspond to the

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[698] Kate Marshall, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time", *American Literary History* 27.3 (2015): 523.

[699] I.e. the Anthropocene; see Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* and *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

[700] Cf. Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[701] Marshall, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene?" citing DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 67.

[702] Cf. Mark Osteen, "Extraordinary Renditions: DeLillo's *Point Omega* and Hitchcock's *Psycho*", *Clues – A Journal of Detection* 31.1 (2013):103-113.

"speculative realism" often associated with the nonhuman turn in critical and cultural theory, as she explains.[703]

In a similar vein, David Cowart places *Point Omega* squarely within what he calls "the disquiet experienced by Americans in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries" as "something that everyone feels and no one fully understands" and which answers to "an evolving grammar of dread".[704] *Point Omega* thus both fits into the general thrust of DeLillo's oeuvre but also adds to the poignancy and precariousness of disappearing humanity, as Mads Rosendahl Thomsen explains:

> DeLillo does not have a grand vision of a trans- and posthuman reality, but nevertheless, in his work, future change is a defining element that circles around different ways in which humanity could be changed, triggered by different desires that are expressed in both the explicit reflections and the actions of the characters. Thus, it is possible to discern various types of desires in his novels. One relates to becoming one with nature or the universe, and ceasing to be human, which is presented as an attractive possibility through hints at a broader cosmological understanding, where ideas of the non-trivial nature of the material world are accentuated, while human consciousness is described as exhausted (…) another desire goes directly in the opposite direction, focusing on the ability of information to dominate and create its own world.[705]

Elster, as the representative of a new postanthropocentric cosmology recalling Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the *point omega* and the *noosphere*, is a disenchanted humanities academic and ex-advisor to the Bush administration over its Gulf War strategy, who voices his misanthropic disaffection with humanity by claiming: "We want to be the dead matter we used to be. We're the last billionth of a second in the evolution of matter".[706] The dialogue [between Elster and the documentary film maker Jim Finley] inevitably turns to climate change, asteroids and famine as possible end-of-the-world scenarios, which Elster ultimately rejects as 'uninteresting', however. Instead, he calls for "thinking further, as he attempts to sketch out principles of evolution and annihilation, and of the collective thought that exists outside the individual, as a collective hive mind".[707]

A key feature in *Point Omega* is DeLillo's use of Douglas Gordon's video art installation *24 Hour Psycho* (1993). This piece of installation art, which continues DeLillo's longstanding motif of intermediality (or "cinematic ekphrasis", as Cowart refers to it) is an extremely slowed-down projection of Hitchcock's movie *Psycho* (1960) and is itself connected to the paleo-ontological theme of species disappearance, deceleration and deep time geology in the novel: "it was like watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion years", as the narrator explains.[708] *Point Omega* and its lack of pace plays a prominent part in Lutz Koepnick's study *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*, which includes DeLillo's novel within a "contemporary poetic of slow writing and reading":[709] "*Point Omega*'s poetic plays out the finite and frail vectors of existential time against the oppressive and ever accelerating logic of social and technological temporality", Koepnick claims.[710] It is the style – the ekphrastic role that Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* plays for the narrative and structure of *Point Omega* – that "invites the subject to recognize its own limitations while exploring the unstable space between the unique and the reproducible, between the ephemeral and the seemingly timeless, between the fickleness of human time and the deep or steady temporality of geological formations and modern machines of information storage".[711] This recognition, linguistically, is emulated by what Koepnick calls DeLillo's "linguistic minimalism – language that engages with the very possibility of meaning and expression" – "each word, each phrase, strikes the reader as if being wrest away from the deserts of utter silence".[712] The effect is one of opening up a space for slowness amidst "our accelerated movements through screen culture": "To explore the space and time in between individual words and sentences – the silent and unsaid as sites of potentiality or virtuality – is what DeLillo's compact prose encourages readers to do".[713] In doing so, "like Gordon's frames, DeLillo's sentences inch toward the monadic and static" and offer "an interface across what exceeds the neoliberal stress of self-management", as Koepnick explains.[714]

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[703] Marshall, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene?", pp. 524 and 537.

[704] David Cowart, "The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo's Point Omega", *Contemporary Literature* 53.1 (2012): 31 and 36; on DeLillo's "fascination with deserts and death" see also Laura Barrett, "'Radiance in dailiness': The Uncanny Ordinary in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*", *Journal of Modern Literature* 42.1 (2018): 106-123.

[705] Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *The New Human in Literature: Posthuman Visions of Change in Body, Mind and Society after 1900* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 199.

[706] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 64.

[707] Rosendahl Thomsen, *The New Human in Literature*, p. 188.

Pieter Vermeulen summarises this stylistic effect in *Point Omega* in the following words:

> The strategy of slowing down the action breaks open the normal pacing of human action and perception in order to remove it from the realm of the eventual ("whatever was happening took forever to happen";[715] and further, its decision to slow down the movie to exactly 24 hours synchronizes human life with the cosmic rhythms of night and day – a shift beyond human categories that the novel's main narrative, which takes place in a desert that refuses to be constrained by human names (…), will repeat.[716]

According to Koepnick, Elster "seems to desire nothing so much than to account for the relativity of human affairs *vis-à-vis* the *longue durée* of geological time, the deep history of the landscape and of the earth". However, his desire is not to end desire, but rather "to experience a different scale, a different analytic, of how to measure the passing of things",[717] or simply to "experience what exceeds and denies experience".[718] And for the filmmaker Finley and his project, this desire, or Elster's search for deep time, can only be rendered by an "extreme long-take cinematography":

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[708] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 59.

[709] Lutz Koepnick, *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 254.

[710] *Ibid*., p. 262.

[711] *Ibid*., p. 273.

[712] *Ibid., p. 275.*

[713] *Ibid*.

[714] *Ibid*., p. 277.

[715] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 4.

[716] Pieter Vermeulen, "Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*, the Anthropocene, and the Scales of Literature", *Studia Neophilologica* 87 (2015): 73.

[717] Koepnick, *On Slowness*, p. 270.

[718] *Ibid.*

> the embeddedness of human time in temporalities that exceed human finitude; the hovering of the subject between what can and what cannot be controlled, between the simple and the complex, the determined and the indeterminate, between global society's relentless speed and the landscape's unchangeable nature.[719]

Koepnick, in fact, provides an admirable description of a (critical) posthumanist agenda when he writes:

> Elster's slowness describes a project of neither fleeing into a spiritualist celebration of timeless humanism nor into apocalyptic and posthistorical antihumanism, but of seeing and thinking calmly in the face of the complexities of the present – probing the contours of what may count as human in the first place and refracting historically hardened notions of subjectivity by exposing one's self to what is nonhuman and incommensurable.[720]

The slowness of *Point Omega* and *24 Hour Psycho* in their ekphrastic juxtaposition thus produces a recognition within the subject of his or her own limitations when faced with the enormity of prehuman geological deep time and the posthuman acceleration of 'machinic speed'.[721]

Point Omega plays a similarly prominent role in Pieter Vermeulen's excellent essay on "the Anthropocene and the scales of literature",[722] even while he adds another, more sceptical, layer to the question of posthumanism and/in literature. Against the belief that the novel might be that genre which has the capacity to deliver ever more "otherness" and which "can serve as an appropriate imaginative vehicle for addressing the ethical and political problems that face us in the early twenty-first century",[723] Vermeulen reminds us that the question of "scaling up" the imagining of the human to the dimensions of "biological and geological time" is today's major challenge for the novel which might well stretch its generic limits to new levels of unrecognisability. Vermeulen, more specifically, uses *Point Omega* to show that "globalization merges with other decidedly non- or post-human powers", a process which constitutes a "move beyond the temporality of trauma, and its foreclosure of global extension, to the nonhuman vastness of *geological* time".[724] The challenge is how to make this vastness visible to the 'human' eye of the reader? For Vermeulen, *Point Omega* is crucial in this context precisely in that it shows how the "impact of nonhuman otherness on human life (…) strains the limits of the novel form".[725] DeLillo's novel in fact stages a confrontation with the limits of human imagination, which means that *Point Omega* can be read as "an attempt to overcome the reliance of the novel form on distinctive events and identifiable individual agents, which can be considered as limitations on the novel's ability to abandon conventional realisms and imagine the geological ramifications of culture", Vermeulen argues.[726]

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[719] Koepnick, *On Slowness*, p. 271.

[720] *Ibid*., p. 272.

[721] On the question of deep time and posthumanism see my *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality*; and "Posthumanism and Deep Time", in: Herbrechter et al., eds., *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (Cham: Springer, 2022), pp. 29-54.

[722] Vermeulen, "Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*, the Anthropocene, and the Scales of Literature".

[723] *Ibid*., p. 69.

[724] *Ibid*., p. 70.

[725] *Ibid*., p. 71.

Point Omega can thus be understood as an allegory of self-reflexive, *critical* posthumanism itself. Like Elster, who is giving "a series of lectures [in Zurich] (…) on what he called the dream of extinction",[727] we, humans, have become interested in the "force of geologic time" (*PO* 24), where the desert has become a "protoworld", as well as an "alien being" *and* "science fiction" (*PO* 25). "Time becoming slowly older. Enormously old. Not day by day. This is deep time, epochal time. Our lives receding into the long past. That's what's out there. The Pleistocene desert, the rule of extinction" (*PO* 91), as Elster reveals. Waiting for point omega to arrive ("the point of waiting just to be waiting" (*PO* 60), "witnessing the last flare of human thought" (*PO* 65) when "brute matter becomes analytical human thought" (*PO* 66), desiring the "paroxysm" (*PO* 92). However, despite all his inhuman disaffection, when Elster, the spokesperson of posthumanism in the novel, faces the idea that his daughter might have been abducted and killed, and as he returns from his desert retreat to civilisation and the city, he turns, as the narrator says, "inconsolably human" (*PO* 121) again. The poignancy of this verdict lies in the fact that there is probably no better way of explaining the ambiguity of 'our' posthuman situation: human, all too human. Literature, meanwhile, is staring into the ruins of the future and almost helplessly keeps reminding itself of the impossibility of its task, namely, to quote Elster one last time: "to cure the terror of time" (*PO* 57).

DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) further adds to the motif of devastation and human disintegration. It is a novel that "intimates a failing species on a threatened planet".[728] However, DeLillo here shifts the perspective from a slow 'geological' posthumanism to the frantic transhumanist fantasies of human life extension, especially through cryogenics, in order to "construct a counternarrative truth" about the human condition in the age of transhuman technology. The plot of the novel develops out of the opposition between Ross Lockhart and his son Jeffrey who can be said to be "foils, representing two competing visions of a human being, not to mention DeLillo's competing impulses as a writer", as Tony Tulathimutte explains.[729] Ross, a rich businessman (motivated by his wife Artis's terminal multiple-sclerosis) is investing in a firm called the Convergence, which claims to have developed a safe technology of 'cryopreservation'.[730] Jeffrey, on the other hand might stand in for "the Enlightenment humanist, a book-lover as much concerned with the death of the humanities as with the death of humanity":[731]

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[726] *Ibid*., p. 77.

[727] DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 45, further references are given in the text as *PO*.

[728] Christopher Schaberg, "Ecological Disorientation in Airline Ads and in DeLillo's *Zero K*", *ISLE* 24.1 (2017): 91.

[729] Tony Tulathimutte, "Back to the Future: Don DeLillo's techno-prophetic novel hungers for tradition", *New Republic* (27 April 2016); available online at: https://newrepublic.com/article/133004/don-delillo-back-future (last accessed 18/12/2023).

[730] For a detailed discussion see Alexandra Glavanakova, "The Age of Humans Meets Posthumanism: Reflections on Don DeLillo's *Zero K*", *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 50.1 (2017): 91-109; and Sherryl, *Biopolitical Futures in Twenty-First-Century Speculative Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 25-45; and Carmen Laguarta-Bueno, "Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016): Transhumanism, Trauma, and the Ethics of Premature Cryopreservation", in: Sonia Baelo-Allué and Mónica Calvo-Pascual, eds., *Transhumanism and Posthumanism in Twenty-First Century Narrative: Perspectives on the Non-Human in Literature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 126-141. The depiction of cryopreservation in DeLillo's novel even made it into a bioethics paper by George J. Annas

> [Jeffrey] dismisses the Convergence as "a highly precise medical procedure guided by mass delusion, by superstition and arrogance and self-deception". His skepticism is rooted in a belief that death and identity are essential to being human, and that the human essence is monistic – one body, one soul, under God, indivisible (…). His father, meanwhile, is the visionary [trans]humanist, who sees death as a logistical problem, life as a quantifiable and measurable phenomenon (…), and the human as a separable biological entity, essentially reducible to body and brain.[732]

In another review, by Rachele Dini, *Zero K* serves as a further example of DeLillo's "speculative turn – from historiography to futurography" characteristic of his postmillennial writing.[733] It displays a linguistic sparseness and a continued "faith in the physical" (i.e. human bodies), which is part of DeLillo's "reclaiming [of] matter" and used for the "crafting [of an alternative] future", according to Dini.[734]

Thus, after speculating on posthumanist themes like deep time, climate change and extinction in *Point Omega*, DeLillo, in *Zero K*, takes on the techno-utopian dimension of posthumanism – or transhumanism, to be more precise.[735] DeLillo's work, like that of many of his contemporaries as well, has of course always been concerned with media and technology (and indeed the *convergence* of media and technology, especially through the process of digitalisation) and the changes in subjectivity that various technologies afford. *Zero K*, however, is *literally* about science and fiction (and their increasing entanglement in contemporary techno-capitalist, globalised, neoliberal society), without strictly being classifiable as a science fiction novel, however. Instead, *Zero K* openly thematises the role of techno-utopianism and techno-dystopianism and, in fact, seems to be sceptical of both. At the same time, it also bears many traits of 'cli-fi' (climate change fiction) already apparent in *Point Omega*. In this sense, DeLillo takes up a current cultural anxiety *and* promise, namely the fear *and* desire of becoming somehow *trans*human, in the face of ambient extinction threats and species angst. *Zero K*'s programmatic statement is: "Everybody wants to own the end of the world";[736] it is the first, and almost the last sentence of the novel (*ZK* 274). It expresses the exhaustion and cynicism of capitalism's ultimate phase, which goes as far as to claim

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and Michael A Grondin based at the Boston University School of Public Health that is interestingly not so much critical of its speculative character or its feasibility but the issues of social equality it raises. Cf. Annas and Grondin, "Frozen Ethics: Melting the Boundaries Between Medical Treatment and Organ Procurement", *The American Journal of Bioethics* 17.5 (2017): 22-24.

[731] On death and "deathlessness", see Nathan Ashman, "'Death Itself Shall Be Deathless': Transnationalism and Eternal Death in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60.3 (2019): 300-320.

[732] Tulathimutte, "Back to the Future: Don DeLillo's techno-prophetic novel hungers for tradition", n.p.

[733] Rachele Dini, "Don DeLillo, Zero K", *European Journal of American Studies*. Reviews 2 (2016): 1; available online at: https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11393 (last accessed 18/12/2023).

[734] *Ibid*., p. 2.

[735] See also Erik Cofer, "Owning the end of the world: *Zero K* and DeLillo's post-postmodern mutation", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59.4 (2018): 459-470.

[736] Don DeLillo, *Zero K* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), p. 3; further references are given in the text as *ZK*.

ownership and anticipate the consumption of its own apocalyptic end – the apocalyptic logic and vision on which it has been thriving and which provides it with its current form of 'zombie' survival. Within this cynical system, Ross stands for the (privileged) individual who wants to survive (or 'own') death as a final commodity, even if that means that he might have to bring forward its eventuality, i.e. by inducing death for the sake of ensuring a 'controlled cryopreservation').

The idea that every death of an individual is the death of an entire 'world' is one of the fundamental assumptions of liberal humanism, an inevitable tragedy that nevertheless, like every tragedy, is supposed to have its cathartic effect. In the case of death this ultimately lies in 'proving' one's humanity, its ultimate 'sharedness'. While his son Jeffery mocks the idea of Ross's "faith-based technology" (*ZK* 8), Ross asks him to "respect the idea" (*ZK* 10). To Ross's discredit, however, the narrator does not fail to note that he "made an early reputation by analysing the profit impact of natural disaster", which literally makes him a "disaster capitalist".

Formally, the novel is divided into two parts with one brief interlude. The first part, "In the Time of Chelyabinsk", a city in Russia, North of Kazakhstan, probably best known for a meteorite that exploded in the sky above it, in 2013, contains the first visit to the Convergence and ends with the cryopreservation of Artis, Ross's second wife. Ross had planned to 'die' with her but decides to postpone his own cryopreservation procedure in order to bring his 'worldly affairs' in order when he returns to 'city life'. While the first part gives the impression of timelessness and remove by way of anticipation of a post-apocalyptic futurity, the second part is called, "In the Time of Konstantinovka" – a town in Eastern Ukraine that is very much at the centre of current historical development: it is a place of social unrest and terrorism as a result of Russian oppression and pro-Russian separatism. The two parts are separated by an eight-page-long interlude entitled "Artis Martineau", which represents a meditative reflection of the kind one might project onto 'cryopreserved mind activity'. Artis – the impersonated posthuman (body) artist so to speak muses over the disembodied identity of a "Woman's body in a pod" (*ZK* 162). The two main parts stand in a relation of both contrast and continuity. Themes that span across are the role the digital (and screen media more specifically) plays in the contemporary human 'identity crisis', which is also connected to the well-established problematic of language and reality in DeLillo's work. The more specifically posthuman or, rather, transhuman theme of 'dis/embodiment' (the mind-body split) and the role of technology in overcoming death, however, is discussed in two major speeches made by Convergence ideologues, the Stenmark Twins in Part 1 (*ZK* 61-78) and Nadja Hrabal in Part 2 (*ZK* 238-246). A third major theme is 'time, timelessness and futurity', announced in the already quoted first sentence of the novel – "Everybody wants to own the end of the world" (*ZK* 3).

What both the *trans*humanist and the (*neo*)humanist voices in the novel compete for is thus what might be called 'futurity', or the right to determine future reality which, in turn, is used to legitimate actions that are designed to 'construct' that very future (in particular, the future of 'humanity'). It is science-fictional politics, *literally*, which is the only politics still available in late modernity. From a *trans*humanist perspective, one might argue, the question concerning human futurity, as Ross muses, is "What happens to the idea of continuum – past, present, future – in the cryonic chamber (…). How human are you without your sense of time? More human than ever? Or do you become fetal, an unborn thing?' (*ZK* 68). What places the novel firmly within the context of the current discussion about the figure of the posthuman, as well as within the question of climate change and the Anthropocene, is the fact that it relies on a structural similarity with 'last man' or 'lone survivor' stories. Jeff articulates this towards the end of the novel: "I wasn't only his son, I was *the* son, the survivor, the heir apparent" (*ZK* 255). His main role, as first person narrator, is thus that of the survivor, the lone witness: "This was my role, to watch whatever they put in front of me" (*ZK* 139). His main concern is therefore a fundamentally 'realist' one, namely, how to bear witness to 'futurity' – arguably the main challenge of contemporary speculative) fiction – or, how to address the fundamental contradiction buried in the phrase '*speculative* realism'.[737] This is articulated in the novel at two levels: on the one hand, the fight over time, futurity and reality, and the role of language and 'names' (another constant theme in DeLillo), on the other hand. The Convergence situates itself outside history (outside the 'world hum, *ZK* 135), in the time of Cheylabinsk, i.e. in the epiphany, the veer between life and death, in spatial and temporal remoteness: "You are completely outside the narrative of what we refer to as history" (*ZK* 237), which is the only hope of creating a sense of 'alternative futurity', as Jeff is being told: "They're making the future. A new idea of the future. Different from the others" (*ZK* 30). The "heralds" – people like Artis and Ross, who 'die' before their time – to some extent resemble the (modernist or futurist) avant-garde artist. Jeff, on the other hand, upon his return to 'the world hum' of 'real' (i.e. historical) life, is taken over by his profound distrust of anything digital. He comes to see what he witnessed at the Convergence as a "plunge into prehistory" (*ZK* 226). For him, the cryogenised human bodies are like "prehistoric artifacts": "Those were humans entrapped, enfeebled, individual lives stranded in some border region of a wishful future (…). It was a form of visionary art, it was body art with broad implications' (*ZK* 256).[738]

One interesting aspect of the Convergence, however, is its somewhat ambiguous relationship to the digital, which it seems to accept as a technology but also wishes to expel or reject as an ontology. Inside the compound the atmosphere is (apart from big screens and medical equipment) "Precambrian" (*ZK* 20), the rooms are "not fitted with digital connections" (*ZK* 20), even though "elaborate cyber-defense" is evidently a vital part of the future-proofing of the entire cryopreservation venture (*ZK* 30). This repression of the digital coincides with Jeff's own distrust, which gains in strength as the novel progresses. Digitalisation is a theme that DeLillo has been engaging with in most of his novels. In *Zero K*, one could argue, digital (screen) media play a very important part in the negotiation between a transhumanist notion of technology as ontology, and a posthumanist or neo-materialist or "matter-realist" view of technology (as Braidotti calls it).[739] Early on in the novel, Artis – the transhumanist body artist par excellence – expresses her 'bio-constructivist' view of perception and reality in very similar terms:

> I'm aware that when we see something, we are getting only a measure of information, a sense, an inkling of what is really there to see… the optic nerve is not telling the full

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[737] On speculative fiction see Sherryl Vint, "Posthumanism and Speculative Fiction", in: Stefan Herbrechter et al., eds., *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (Cham: Springer, 2022), pp. 225-246; and Pieter Vermeulen, "The End of the Novel", in: Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann, eds., *New Approaches to the Twenty-First Century Anglophone Novel* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 317-336.

[738] On the obvious connection here to questions of embodiment and DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2001) see Boxall, "A Leap Out of Our Biology: History, Tautology, and Biomatter in Don DeLillo's Later Fiction", *Contemporary Literature* 58.4 (2017): 526-555.

[739] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), pp. 158-59.

> truth. We're seeing only intimations. The rest is our invention, our way of reconstructing what is actual, if there is any such thing, philosophically, that we can call actual. I know that research is being done here, somewhere in this complex, on future models of human vision. Experiments using robots, lab animals, who knows, people like me. (*ZK* 45)

Artis also speaks of her experience of a new vision after surgery on her right eye, twelve years before. Now, she projects her enhanced vision onto 'futurity' (which also embraces someaspects of posthumanist postanthropocentrism): "I remember clearly what I thought. I thought, Is this the world as it truly looks? Is this the reality we haven't learned how to see? (...) Is this the world that animals see? (...) The world that belongs to hawks, to tigers in the wild?" (*ZK* 46). This transcendent vision of an entirely new expanded reality is reflected, on the one hand, in the proliferating virtuality of the digital screens in the novel, and, on the other hand, in what could be called Jeff's desperate 'nominalism' and his belief in the redemptive qualities of language (also a well-established theme in DeLillo's work).

Screens make their appearance throughout the novel and always at crucial moments in Jeff's narrative of his time at the Convergence. The screens "appear in the halls and disappear into the ceiling" (*ZK* 85). Jeff finds the hyperrealism of the screens deeply disturbing: "Then, up close, screen about to burst with flames that jump a stream and appear to spring into the camera and out toward the hallway where I stand watching" (*ZK* 121; see also pp. 152, 170 and 259). However, he is also aware of the digitality of the images with all the editing and simulative possibilities this contains: "It begins to occur to me that I may be seeing the same running cluster repeatedly, shot and reshot, two dozen runners made to resemble several hundred, a flawless sleight of editing (…). Is it possible that this is not factual documentation rendered in a selective manner but something radically apart? It's a digital weave, every fragment manipulated and enhanced, all of it designed, edited, redesigned (…). These were visual fictions, the wildfires and burning monks, digital bits, digital code, all of it computer-generated, none of it real" (*ZK* 152). (Digital) 'realism' is thus a foregrounded theme of the novel itself, and in that respect it is certainly readable through a well-established (e.g. Baudrillardian, 'postmodernist') lens. Digitality in *Zero K*, however, plays a more complex role. In the "survival garden" scene, Jeff is confronted with the view (expressed by an enigmatic monk) that digital technology is the precondition for the (transhumanist, cryogenic idea of) 'disembodiment' in the first place: "Don't you see and feel these things more acutely than you used to? The perils and warnings? Something gathering, no matter how safe you may feel in your wearable technology. All the voice commands and hyper-connections that allow you to become disembodied" (*ZK* 127). Jeff increasingly comes to share this scepticism of digital, connected and networked (or, converging) technologies with their potential of disembodiment and control, "the numbing raptures of the Web" (*ZK* 167). What is most interesting, however, is that the Convergence ideologues and transhumanists themselves do not trust digital technology in the hands of the technocapitalist system, as Nadya Hrabal explains: "That world, the one above (…) is being lost to the systems. To the transparent networks that slowly occlude the flow of all those aspects of nature and character that distinguish humans from elevator buttons and doorbells (…). Those of you who will return to the surface. Haven't you felt it? The loss of autonomy. The sense of being virtualized. The devices you use (…). Do you ever feel unfleshed? All the coded impulses you depend on to guide you" (*ZK* 239). This discourse is mired in the idea of digitality as somehow disembodying while at the same time being 'real'. In fact, what the Convergence seek through their cryogenic transcendence programme is nothing but the resurrection of the soul *and* the body (a very Catholic theme, present throughout DeLillo's work) even while they can only envisage this transubstantiation in digital terms, through digital technology – a technology, however, they cannot really trust.

Conclusion – A Dark Yearning

> "It's only human to want to know more, and then more, and then more", I said. "But it's also true that what we don't know is what makes us human. And there's no end to knowing". (*ZK* 131)

What might thus make DeLillo a 'posthumanist' writer – in the same sense that writers who are critical and speculative commentators of postmodernity and the postmodern condition may be called 'postmodernist' – is that, especially in his 'postmillennial' work, he thematises ends, limits and transformations of the human. He thus engages with the spectre of 'posthumanity' and produces counternarratives in the face of a media-technological process that might be referred to as 'posthumanisation'. He does so in order to construct alternative truths about 'our' posthuman condition. In precisely this sense, DeLillo's work, especially *Point Omega* and *Zero K*, is representative of a *critical* posthumanism. One important aspect here is DeLillo's continuous critique of technology's misguided promise "to free humans from material encumbrances" – an attitude that might place him and many other contemporary authors, in the context of a 'return to the real', or a new realism. More specifically, however, DeLillo could be said to embrace *speculative* realism as an important approach for contemporary (posthumanist) fiction – a view, once more, already anticipated by Tabbi:

> DeLillo's novels have always resisted the impulse to transcend their own materiality, not only in words but in the human body, in manufactured objects, even in the printed circuits of metal and silicon that make possible the seemingly weightless communications of modern electronics (…). DeLillo is no technophobe (…). As much as any contemporary writer, he has allowed his own language to play against the various languages of modern technology, to the point that he will often seem to disappear into the anonymous media that process the documents, photographs, sounds, and sights of contemporary culture. But these multiple texts are never wholly taken lightly; DeLillo never loses sight of the embodied reality beneath the information grid.[740]

As a writer – and staunch defender of the (undoubtedly still very humanist) medium of literary fiction and the novel more specifically, however – DeLillo has embraced and critically thematised 'the posthuman' (and, quite predictably, has found its figurations wanting). Inevitably, he has done so by providing counternarratives of its symptoms, but whether he has done justice to posthuman *desire* is questionable. Located in the ambiguity between the 'yearning for human potentiality' and the 'frustration about human reality', posthumanism's critical potential ultimately is denied by DeLillo's very own (*neo*humanist) desire to "rehumanize, re-member and reinvent".[741] This can be seen in the ambiguous role DeLillo attributes to fiction itself: faced with the "vision of undying mind and body" (*ZK* 242) and

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[740] Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, pp. 206-207.

[741] Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, p. 7.

"science awash in irrepressible fantasy" (*ZK* 257), the writer's task, DeLillo or at least his narrator claims, is "to subvert the dance of transcendence" (*ZK* 242) even while he might not be able to "stifle [his] admiration" (*ZK* 257). This is a stance, however, that might no longer be quite available as speculative (realist) fiction is sucked into the neoliberal transhumanist imaginary.

Postscript: Don Delillo's The Silence[742]

Don DeLillo's work has a long history of 'unclassifiability', as neither (late) modernist nor postmodernist,[743] and as a critical and often cynical commentary of contemporary American culture based on media mass consumption, environmental decline and a highly ambivalent attitude towards humans' increasing dependence on technology and screen media.[744] As one of his most astute and consistent commentators, Peter Boxall, writes: "DeLillo's fiction suggests a deep underlying connection between technology, violence and capital, a connection which undermines the possibility of historical progression".[745] Together with what Joe Tabbi called DeLillo's aesthetic "talent of self-effacement", DeLillo's choice of "media and technological systems (…) as sublime objects of contemplation"[746] therefore opens up possibilities of reading his work from a posthumanist point of view or maybe of even seeing him as a 'posthumanist' author.

DeLillo's "pared-back late style" in his novellas since *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Point Omega* (2010), with their "desert sparseness" and "bare-skinned narratives",[747] has been associated with a new literary phase of "post-postmodernism".[748] His late work appears to oscillate between urban and desert-like "post-human landscapes",[749] and between "flesh and code".[750] Thus, even if they do not display "a grand vision of a trans- or posthuman reality", DeLillo's narratives are driven by posthumanist "desires" like "becoming one with nature or the universe, and ceasing to be human". [751] While human self-abandonment in the face of the desert and deep geological time is foregrounded in *Point Omega*,[752] loss of human self-control and the technological "leap out of biology"[753] is the main topic of DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016, as seen above.[754]

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[742] This section was first published online as "Don DeLillo's (The) Silence", *The Genealogy of the Posthuman* (2021); available at: https://criticalposthumanism.net/delillos-the-silence/ (accessed 18/12/2023).

[743] Cf. for example Paul Giaimo, *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer's Work* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), p. 20; or Peter Knight, who is uncertain whether DeLillo's writing is "a symptom, a diagnosis, or an endorsement of the condition of postmodernity", in Knight, "DeLillo, Postmodernism, Postmodernity", in: John N. Duvall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 27.

[744] See Randy Laist, *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), as well as Anthony Miccoli's consideration of Don DeLillo in *Posthuman Suffering and the Technological Embrace* (New York: Lexington Books, 2010).

[745] Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 7. See also Elise A. Martucci, *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo* (London: Routledge, 2007); and Boxall "DeLillo and Media Culture", in: John N. Duvall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, pp. 43-52.

[746] Joseph Tabbi, *The Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 173.

[747] Cf. Katherine de Cunha Lewin and Kiron Ward, "Introduction: A trick of the light: Don DeLillo in the twenty-first century", in: Lewin and Ward, eds., *Don DeLillo: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 3; and Peter Boxall's "Interview: The edge of the future: A discussion with Don DeLillo", in the same volume, p. 160. On DeLillo's "late style" see also Matthew Shipe , "War's Haiku: The Politics of Don DeLillo's Late Style", *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon* 4.2 (5) (2016): 1-23; and Aine Mahon and Fergal McHugh, "Lateness and the Inhospitable in Stanley Cavell and Don DeLillo", *Philosophy and Literature* 40.2 (2016): 446-464.

[748] Cf. David Cowart, "The DeLillo Era: Literary Generations in the Postmodern Period", in: Peter Schneck and Philipp Schweighäuser, eds., *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction: Transatlantic*

DeLillo's most recent novella, *The Silence*,[755] continues to illustrate DeLillo's conviction that "we depend on disaster to consolidate our vision"; however, it also (still) contains the hope that "fiction is all about reliving things. It is our second chance", in DeLillo's words.[756] It is also, like all of his novels since 2001, still very much written with a sensibility of a future that is "in ruins".[757] The novella deals with the imminent danger of collapse of our increasingly digital lives, as Craig Hubert characterises the plot in his review:

> The skeletal premise of *The Silence* – a near fatal plane crash, a Super Bowl party upended by the television screen going blank, followed by a series of digital connections quickly being wiped out – is simply constructed to allow the characters to end up in the same apartment, to be part of the same swirling conversation, to make sense of what is happening in their heads and in the outside world. For DeLillo, the difference between the two is often tenuous.[758]

Perspectives on Don DeLillo (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 223; as well as Julia Breitenbach, *Analog Fictions for the Digital Age: Litertary Realism and Photographic Discourses in Novels after 2000* (Rochester: Camden House, 2012), pp. 3ff.

[749] Cf. Clara Sarmento, "The Angel in a Country of Last Things: DeLillo, Auster, and the Post-human Landscape", *Arcadia* 41 (2006): 147-159.

[750] Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *The New Human in Literature*, p. 191.

[751] *Ibid*., pp. 198-199.

[752] Cf. Lutz Koepnick's reading of *Point Omega* in Koepnick, *On Slowness*, pp. 249-279 discussed at length above, as well as Pieter Vermeulen's, "Don DeLillo's Point Omega, the Anthropocene, and the Scales of Literature", and David Watson, "Vanishing Points; or, the Timescapes of the Contemporary American Novel".

[753] Cf. Peter Boxall, "A Leap Out of Biology: History, Tautology, and Biomatter in Don DeLillo's Later Fiction".

[754] See Alexandra Glavanakova, "The Age of Humans Meets Posthumanism: Reflections on Don DeLillo's *Zero K*", and Erik Cofer, "Owning the end of the world: *Zero K* and DeLillo's post-postmodern mutation".

[755] Don DeLillo, *The Silence* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

[756] Don DeLillo, "The Power of History", *New York Times* (7 September 1997); available online: https://movies2.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html (accessed 18/12/2023).

[757] Cf. DeLillo's well-known post-9/11 piece "In the ruins of the future", *The Guardian* (22 December 2001); available online: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo (accessed 18/12/2023).

[758] Craig Hubert, "Don DeLillo's *The Silence* Imagines the Death of Tech", *The Observer* (23 October 2020); available online at: https://observer.com/2020/10/the-silence-don-delillo-review/ (accessed 18/12/2023).

The "digital shutdown", *The Silence* portrays, according to Alex Preston, appears like an attempt by DeLillo to "bring Samuel Beckett into the Facebook age".[759] What could be described as "our tragedy of forgetting" in our increasing dependence on our externalised (hypermnemetic) digital devices, platforms and networks is shown in *The Silence*'s apocalyptic absurdity as the ultimate communication breakdown: "What began as a dialogue, gathered energy as trialogue, and peaked as a pentalogue, soon topples like a Babel tower and disperses into monologues of unconsoled dissociation: five separate 'friends' unable to communicate, unable to connect, unable even to remember, nattering to themselves like lunatics, haunting the hallways, counting the stairs".[760] In *The Silence*'s own words: "When a missing fact emerges without digital assistance, each person announces it to the other while looking off into a remote distance, the otherworld of what was known and lost" (*TS* 14-15). The insistent puzzlement and fascination with the "blank screen" – "What is it hiding from us?" (*TS* 28) – in the experience of "systems failure" (*TS* 34), is like staring into a "black hole" – the object and "event horizon" of Albert Einstein's obsession, who serves as a constant reference – and which is bringing down "world civilization" (*TS* 35). Humans have become "digital addicts (…) engrossed, mesmerized, consumed by the device" (*TS* 99).

It would take too long to fully show to what extent *The Silence* is engaging with what have come to be known as posthumanist motifs. Here is merely a short overview: human vulnerability in the face of ubiquitous surveillance and face recognition; the loss of 'our' sense of reality through increasing 'virtualisation'; an artificial intelligence that "betrays who we are and how we live and think" (*TS* 68); the extension of war into cyberspace, biotechnology and "drone wars" (*TS* 92); the increasingly invasive cyborgisation of our bodies ("Do a select number of people have a form of phone implanted in their bodies?" (*TS* 80, 82), "Have our minds been digitally remastered?" (TS 88)); human obsolescence ("We're being zombified (…) We're being bird-brained" (*TS* 84), with only "human slivers" remaining (*TS* 90)). In sum, *The Silence* covers our ambient eco-technological catastrophism ("Plastics, microplastics. In our air, our water, our food" (*TS* 94)) and our "end-of-the-world movie" (*TS* 104).

The idea of a "global silence" after the breakdown of (communication) technology makes its explicit appearance on p. 80 of *The Silence*. It hints at a 'post-technological' silence that threatens to engulf the human and its entire 'world'. As a writer, however, DeLillo is also concerned in another way with the (global as well as individual, personal) breakdown of communication and its (presumed) ensuing silence. His own imminent silence (every piece of writing, at least from a certain age onwards, is a writing against the silence that must follow death), as well as, much more worryingly for any writer, the silence 'after' literature, or the silence that literature imagines after itself – i.e. the world ending in silence (without 'us', and without any literature to witness our demise, no survivor to read and remember the human, nothing at all). This strangest of visions is, however, nothing new. In a sense, *The Silence* can be seen as the latest example of what Ihab Hassan, in 1967, speaking from the apocalyptic vantage point of another (but still very much relevant) extinction threat, called "the literature of silence".[761]

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[759] Alex Preston, "*The Silence* by Don DeLillo review – Beckett for the Facebook age", *The Guardian* (27 October 2020); available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/27/the-silence-by-don-delillo-review-beckett-for-the-facebook-age (accessed 18/12/2023).

[760] This is Joshua Cohen's vivid description, cf. Cohen, "In Don DeLillo's New Novel, Technology Is Dead. Civilization Might Be, Too", *The New York Times* (20 October 2020); available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/20/books/review/don-delillo-the-silence.html (accessed 18/12/2023).

It is no surprise that the paradox of a writing that survives its own end by, or in writing, anticipating it, (re)enacting it, so to speak, might return with a vengeance in our so-called 'posthuman times'. DeLillo says as much in his interview with Peter Boxall, where he evokes the idea of a "novel without humans", a novel "writing itself":

> The novel in the embrace of new technologies will be the novel that writes itself. Will there still be the lone individual seated in a room trying to create a narrative that is equal to the advancing realities of the world around us? It may be that the fragile state of the planet will summon a new kind of novel with a language that alters our perceptions (…). Will advancing technology revitalize human consciousness or drown it forever?[762]

There is just one snag in DeLillo's (and literature's) ongoing dialectic of exhaustion and (self)replenishment:[763] only a human(ist) would (want to) imagine the world after them as 'silent'. It most certainly will be anything but…

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[761] Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967). For a commentary, see Herbrechter, *Lawrence Durrell, Postmodernism and the Ethics of Alterity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 192-221.

[762] DeLillo, in: Boxall, "Interview: The edge of the future: A discussion with Don DeLillo", p. 164.

[763] See John Barth's seminal pieces: Barth, *The Literature of Exhaustion and The Literature of Replenishment* (Northridge: Lord John Press, 1982).

Postface

14 Posthumanism and the Death of Tragedy

> Humanists have long found in Greek tragedy an illustration of their ideal, but tragedy seems a strange genre on which to pin the celebration of the human.[764]

Taken literally, the phrase ‘posthuman tragedy’ sounds somewhat counterintuitive. If the genre of tragedy depends on the “downfall or death of the protagonist” (*OED*), then surely the idea of *human* tragedy should be unsurpassable. What imaginable or unimaginable posthuman figure or form of agency could take the place of Antigone, or Hamlet, or Faust, or any other tragic hero – and produce a similar (if any) tragic affectivity or mode in human spectators? Machines, cyborgs, animals, chimeras and objects are usually the subjects of ‘lower’ genres and registers like science fiction, fables, or (animistic) fairy tales. They are far closer to comedy and ‘error’. It is true, they might be able to cause much (human) suffering (which corresponds to the second, ‘modern’, definition of tragedy as “an event, series of events, or situation causing great suffering, destruction, or distress, and typically involving death (esp. on a large scale or when premature; *OED*)”, but what could be their *hamartia*? What cruel *tyche* might afflict a nonhuman? What *anagnorisis*, what kind of *catharsis* would the death of a posthuman bring, *for humans*?

However, for posthumanisms of various kinds, the human is no longer self-evident, or the whole story. They predict or call for ‘transcendence’ of the human, they erode boundaries between humans and (their) nonhuman others, they question human exceptionalism and promote postanthropocentric value systems. They reopen the question concerning technology and human (and nonhuman) ‘technogenesis’. They advocate new relationships between human and nonhuman forms of agency, new understandings of environment and ecology. They also revolutionise ‘our’ self-understanding in terms of embodiment and materiality, cognition and consciousness, community and ethics. They foresee a ‘world without us’, speculating about human extinction in the age of human-induced, anthropogenic, climate change. They promote a more-than-human ethics, based on new materialisms, entanglements and object ontologies. How could they not also have a radical effect on aesthetics (and thus literature and ‘the literary’), pedagogy and spirituality? In other words, how could they *not* affect the very notion of tragedy with their timeless desire to re-engineer the human condition, especially when the outcome of that desire in the traditions of literature, theatre and other representations has tended to be, always already, inherently tragic?

There seems no other choice then but to take posthumanism and the posthuman *seriously*. If seriousness is a question of raised stakes, then the tragic potential of posthumanism and the posthuman, especially when taken *literally*, could not in fact be higher. These posthuman stakes, after all, concern human survival, a world ‘after’ humans, the evolutionary passing of a species, climatic cataclysm, utter destruction and extinction. What more do you need for the finale of a grand tragedy? Leaves the question of *catharsis*. Without humans, who would be ‘cleansed’, educated or uplifted by these tragic events? Surely AI, Nature, nonhuman animals, or Gaia would remain quite unmoved by ‘our’ demise.

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[764] Bonnie Honig, “Antigone’s Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism”, *New Literary History* 41.1 (2010): 2.

Tragic Times

> The question whether tragedy is possible in our times sounds paradoxical because the times *are* tragic.[765]

There has always been a strong case for explaining the tragic as a fundamental reaction to the experience of the meaninglessness of the world, of life, of suffering. It is a reaction to theodicy and the question of evil that can spark either nihilism or a dogged insistence on positivity emerging from and getting the better of existential despair in the form of cultural 'mourning'. It is in this sense that meaning can arise from suffering, namely from overcoming the kind of the suffering existence tends to cause. A tragic *humanism* depends on this in that it turns tragedy and its cathartic experience into the highest form of art and humanity. It sparks a fundamentally melancholic 'yearning for the human', as one might put it, understood as the overcoming of adversity and a purification or cleansing, a transcendence of the otherwise senseless 'human condition' – or, the 'gnostic' drama.[766]

Central to a modern and contemporary understanding of tragedy and the tragic in these terms is twentieth-century existentialism and its (tragic) humanism based on "despair and revolt" in the face of the "absurd".[767] Raymond Williams here specifically refers to Albert Camus, for whom "humanism is insistent: a refusal to despair; a commitment to heal", while "the tragedy lies in the common condition, against which the revolt is made"[768] – an attitude shared by Marxism, Freudianism and Existentialism, all of which, according to Williams, are "tragic":

> Man can achieve his full life only after violent conflict; man is essentially frustrated, and divided against himself, while he lives in society; man is torn by intolerable contradictions, in a condition of essential absurdity.[769]

Camus himself, in 1955, when he wrote his "Sur l'avenir de la tragédie",[770] remained undecided as to whether after the Second World War there was likely to be a revival of the tragic genre, but he conceded that there was at least a legitimate claim to one: "Our time coincides with a drama of civilisation which, today as before, might favour a tragic expression".[771] Even in the absence of spiritualism or the transcendental in modern times, where "man" only confronts "himself", tragedy remains thinkable, since "tragedy moves between extreme nihilism and unlimited hope":[772]

> The world the eighteenth-century individual thought to be able to submit to and model according to reason has indeed taken shape, but it is a monstrous shape. Rational and

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[765] Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 309.

[766] Cf. Jane Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

[767] Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), p. 174.

[768] *Ibid*., p. 183.

[769] *Ibid*., p. 189.

[770] Albert Camus, "Sur l'avenir de la tragédie [1955]", in : *Œuvres complètes III: 1949-1956* (Paris : Gallimard, 2008), pp. 1111-1121.
2008: 1111-1121)

[771] *Ibid*., p. 1114 (all translations unless indicated otherwise are mine).

[772] *Ibid*., p. 1117.

> outrageous at the same time, it is the world of history. Given this outrageousness, history has taken the face of destiny. Man doubts whether he will be able to control it, he can merely fight it. It is a curious paradox that humanity thanks to the very weapons used to reject the idea of inevitability has created another hostile destiny for itself. Having turned the reign of the human into a new god, man now once again turns against this god. He is being challenged, at once fighting and disconcerted, divided between absolute hope and definitive doubt. He therefore lives in a tragic climate. This is maybe what explains that tragedy wishes to be reborn. Man, today, cries out his revolt knowing that this revolt has limits, he demands freedom and suffers necessity. Thus torn by contradiction, man hence is conscious of his ambiguity and that of his history and is therefore tragic *par excellence*. He may be marching towards the formulation of his own tragedy that will be obtained on the day *Everything Will Be Fine*.[773]

There are nevertheless several ways in which this tragic humanism may no longer be entirely adequate, if it ever was, notwithstanding its undeniable and venerable 'heroism' and 'greatness'.

Bonnie Honig is rightly suspicious of the humanists' predilection for tragedy and the sacrificial desire that informs it, which is why she speaks of "mortalist humanism":

> If humanists promote tragedy as their genre of choice, it is because they think tragedy renders clear the human spirit, exhibiting human willingness to sacrifice on behalf of a principle, commitment, or desire, or knowingly to accept one's implication in unchosen acts or defiantly to march to one's death with head held high or to refuse vengeance or even justice on behalf of love for another or perhaps even an ideal of the self. Tragic characters die but their principles live on. They suffer, but something beautiful is made of their suffering.[774]

The arch-human protagonists of classical tragedy, like Antigone, appeal to humanists because they "dignify, universalize, and humanize suffering", which means that:

> A certain human commonality is furthered by tragedy's tendency to depict with sympathy the suffering on all sides of a conflict. Just as the 'cry' of suffering gets under

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[773] *Ibid*., p. 1119. The French original is:

> Le monde que l'individu du XVIIIe siècle croyait pouvoir soumettre et modeler par la raison et la science a pris une forme en effet, une forme monstrueuse. Rationnel et démesuré à la fois, il est le monde de l'histoire. Mais à ce degré de démesure, l'histoire a pris la face du destin. L'homme doute de pouvoir la dominer, il peut seulement y lutter. Paradoxe curieux, l'humanité par les mêmes armes avec lesquelles elle avait rejeté la fatalité s'est retaillé un destin hostile. Après avoir fait un dieu du règne humain, l'homme se retourne à nouveau contre ce dieu. Il est en contestation, à la fois combattant et dérouté, partagé entre espoir absolu et le doute définitif. Il vit donc dans un climat tragique. Ceci explique peut-être que la tragédie veuille renaître. L'homme d'aujourd'hui qui crie sa révolte en sachant que cette révolte a des limites, qui exige la liberté et subit la nécessité, cet homme contradictoire, déchiré, désormais conscient de l'ambiguïté de l'homme et de son histoire, cet homme c'est l'homme tragique par excellence. Il marche peut-être vers la formulation de sa propre tragédie qui sera obtenue le jour du *Tout est bien*.

[774] Honig, "Antigone's Two Laws", pp. 2-3.

> language's surface to access a common humanity said to underlie our linguistic divisions, so tragedy gets under the skin of politics to scratch the essence of the human. Here tragedy's power is not that it redeems suffering but that it exemplifies it in ways that highlight the human's most basic common denominator.[775]

One reason for this humanist attraction and 'exemplarity' is of course that it is based on a fundamentally 'solitary' understanding of the heroic human, who is usually male and 'noble'. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore that, (a) the human (as a solitary figure, but more importantly, as a species) is also the cause of immense suffering not only to other humans but even more so to nonhumans (from nonhuman animals to the entire planet); and, (b) that suffering is not only a unique attribute of the human, thus taking Bentham's 'can they suffer' seriously and extending it to life more generally and even beyond, to the 'inorganic', including, in posthuman times, the proliferation of 'technological' others.

If one follows Anthony Miccoli's argument, technology might indeed have become the main source for the "human expression of suffering and pain".[776] This "posthuman suffering", Miccoli characterises as an "affective state characterized by a perceived feeling of inadequacy, alienation, or lack of agency or efficiency in relation to technological artefacts or systems of use".[777] Posthuman tragedy would then arise out of "the awareness that both knowledge and existence are contingent upon the supplement and presence of a technological other through which that knowledge and existence can be achieved", or, in other words, that "the only way in which we can know ourselves or *be human* is through technology or the supplement of a technological other"[778] – i.e. a stronger variant of Günther Anders's "Promethean shame".[779]

The Law of Genre

Tragedy classically involves "the downfall or death of the protagonist", as the OED reminds us; it is therefore always somehow 'sacrificial'. There is something elegiac to the tragic, a gravity of matter, form and tone. Tragedy is, by definition, no laughing matter, due to its seriousness – this is its fundamental difference to comedy. It requires an end of a particular kind that also marks the outcome of a flaw (*hamartia*) that leads to (some) destruction and atonement – which differentiates it from hybrid genres like tragicomedy or *Trauerspiel*. It involves shock, often even horror and distress leading to sorrow, lamentation and grief. It requires a 'catastrophe', a disaster and a cataclysm of events that unfold almost inevitably – a 'mechanism' of which the characters implicated remain unaware, hence the irony that is supposed to evoke pity, a human reaction not to be expected from the unforgiving gods or fate.

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[775] *Ibid*., p. 3.

[776] Anthony Miccoli, *Posthuman Suffering and the Technological Embrace* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), p. 1.

[777] Anthony Miccoli, "Posthuman Suffering", *Genealogy of the Posthuman* (2017), n.p.; available online at: https://criticalposthumanism.net/posthuman-suffering/ (accessed 20/12/2023).

[778] *Ibid*.

[779] Cf. Christopher Müller, "Günther Anders", *Genealogy of the Posthuman* (2016), n.p.; available online at https://criticalposthumanism.net/anders-gunther/ (accessed 20/12/2023).

This is why tragedy "tears us apart, it shatters our sense of ourselves and the world".[780] It 'creates' a certain hostility, or a face-off with the world, which it perceives as 'strange'. It is about human 'alienation' from itself, from divinity, from materiality which, fundamentally or existentially, even morally is unacceptable. In its "apocalypticism"[781] it causes an outrage or "revolt" (cf. Camus above). The dramatic nature of life and its (tragic) truth lies in its twists and turns (*peripeteia*) which ultimately lead to the realisation or self-knowledge (*anagonorisis*) of the true misery of existence and the ultimate absence of a reason, cause or justice. What tragedy finally reveals is thus the "ethical and spiritual horror of a world in which violence, torture and terror recur unendingly".[782] The only positive aspect of this loss of sense and self in tragedy lies in the sharing of its affects and insights, in the 'sympathy' – therefore: "there is no drama without sympathy, but there is no sympathy without drama".[783] Between pity (*pathos*) and fear (*phobos*), tragedy is an "*affront* to our desires for meaning and coherence".[784] This is its most important 'pedagogical' aspect, its experimentation with 'limit experiences' and with what happens when visible or invisible boundaries are transgressed and order is preserved or reinstated and existential conflict is 'resolved'.

From a religious point of view the tragic is about guilt and expiation (cf. Girard's "scapegoat"), and in its highest form, namely to be 'guiltlessly' guilty. 'It wasn't my fault!' the hero might claim. 'It's always your fault!', the Gods will reply. From a moral point of view, tragedy is about freedom, even if it may only be the 'noble' (maybe even sublime) acceptance of a guiltless blame (cf. Jesus as the (sacrificial) lamb of God), or in the difference between believing oneself to be free while the gods have already decided otherwise. From a 'liberal' point of view, this freedom is a continuous internal, psychological, struggle between good and bad, between guilt and conscience, crime and punishment and so on, which ultimately is said to constitute the individual (human) subject, who is (always belatedly, so to speak) called upon to make the 'right' decision. Isolation, damage and "self-mutilation"[785] are thus at the heart of the tragic experience whether it may be 'staged' or lived as 'everyday life' experience.

The paradoxical character of the attraction that tragedy and the tragic still hold over (many of) 'us' lies in the fact, as Julian Young explains, that tragedy is about distressing events that happen to an individual, often to "the finest among us",[786] while still, at the end, it leads to a kind of release, a kind of enjoyment or an "enthusiasm" that translates into applause – an almost perverse kind of "tragic pleasure" arising out of the acquisition of some higher "knowledge". As Walter Kaufman writes:

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[780] Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, "The Tragic", in: *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Harlow: Longman, 2004), pp. 103-112.
and Royle, p. 103.
[781] *Ibid*., p. 104.
[782] *Ibid*., p. 107.
[783] *Ibid*.
[784] *Ibid*., p. 108.
[785] Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 208.
[786] Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Zizek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 1.

> And if we praise the delights of reading and writing about tragedy, are we not seeking joy through the contemplation of the sufferings of our fellow men? Why seek out past sorrows when there is more pain and grief now than a man can cope with?[787]

The question as well as the 'joy' undoubtedly persist even in the kind of pleasure experienced in posthuman times and scenarios, where (at least some) humans display both awe and a certain, maybe perverse, enthusiasm at the prospect of a 'world without us', of human apocalypse and extinction. Maybe the world would be a better place 'after' us, maybe it would even "miss us", as Alan Weisman conjectures.[788]

Kaufman also reminded us that tragedy, at least in its classic form, is also an indictment of the "brutality and inhumanity of most morality".[789] This, one may suppose, depends on where one stands in terms of 'tradition' and whether the 'best' of humanity already lies behind, or still before 'us'. Is the posthuman(ist) aspect of that scenario that it is an entire species which is disappearing – and as it happens, that of the 'paragon of animals' – or the fact that any extinction 'event', from asteroids to climate change or a pandemic, will always hit the underprivileged masses of that species most, while preserving the most 'noble' and affluent longest? There therefore seems to be nothing 'democratic' even about posthuman tragedies and their radical nihilism. A planet without us is only one remove from the idea that it would have been better if the human had never seen the light of day, or had never been the outcome of evolution, better never to have been born.[790]

If it is true that tragedy has been a subject of philosophical discourse since Aristotle, but that only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic, as Peter Szondi's famously opens his *Versuch über das Tragische,*[791] and if this shift from tragedy to the tragic entails the loss of the sense of 'ineluctability' in a (classical) tragic conflict, which is nevertheless required for an 'intense' emotional response, where does the inevitability of catastrophic anthropogenic climate change range on the scale of tragicness? Ludwig Pfeiffer points to modern bureaucratisation, rationalisation and the ubiquity of media as main obstacles for a tragic sense of self which requires a direct experience of a person to the world.[792] The modern "hankering for re-enchantment" Pfeiffer evokes[793] can also be seen at work in contemporary (posthumanist) ecological thought that is looking for some deeper, but not necessarily exclusively human, significance, or a new form of 'worlding', even while the deepest form of human conflict might now involve an increasing dependence on technology and a perceived lack of agency, all the while the planet or Gaia seem to be turning against 'us'.

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[787] Kaufman, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, p. xvi.

[788] Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), p. 5.

[789] Kaufman, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, p. xvii.

[790] Rita Felski, "Introduction", in: Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 4; cf. also David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm Of Coming Into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[791] Peter Szondi, *Versuch über das Tragische* (Frankfurt/Main: Insel Verlag, 1961); also taken up by K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, "The Tragic: On the Relation between Literary Experience and Philosophical Concepts", *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, 77 (1990): 24.

[792] Pfeiffer, "The Tragic", p. 27.

[793] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Life in the ruins, postapocalyptic life, after the worst but not after the end, of course, at least for now, is this tragic? As David Scott claims, ours is a "tragic sensibility" that is "less driven by the confident hubris of those teleologies that once extracted the future (postcolonial and otherwise [one might also add 'transhumanist' here]) so seamlessly from the past, and it is more attuned to the ambiguities and paradoxes of the relation between time and action, intentions and contingencies, determinations and chance".[794] The threatening posthuman scenario undoubtedly does return us to the tragic – even while, from a cosmic point of view, it might also look 'comic', as Mark McGurl claims.[795] "Tragedy shows what is perishable, what is fragile, and what is slow moving about us", as Simon Critchley opens his *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us*.[796] Some posthumanisms are banking on this 'slowness' of the tragic experience of deceleration, which might act as an "emergency brake" to the "worship of the new prosthetic gods of technology".[797] Maybe before hastening to move on towards the posthuman we need another thorough confrontation with ourselves and what we do not know – tragedy may be giving time to thinking in the absence of certainty. Which means that there is, as one might argue, a strong correlation between deconstruction and the tragic, as the time of theory and of/or as theatre:

> Theatre is always theoretical, and theory is a theatre, where we are spectators on a drama that unfolds: *our* drama. In theatre, human action, human *praxis*, is called into question theoretically.[798]

It may thus be our very complicity in our downfall that could be properly tragic today, our willing handover to a technological successor species, a 'destiny' that transhumanists not only foresee but actively indulge in as 'inevitable'.

The Posthuman Death of the Death of Tragedy

> *What is Tragedy in Utopia?* There is tragedy in Snowman's melting. Mass murders are not required.[799]

As Susan Sontag remarked in "The Death of Tragedy" in 1961: "Modern discussions of the possibility of tragedy are not exercises in literary analysis; they are exercises in cultural diagnostics, more or less disguised".[800] Mourning the 'death of tragedy' as a genre implies a loss of tragic 'ability', or, in other words, an overabundance of contemporary "self-consciousness", that prevents modern writers from writing tragedies – "an increasing burden of subjectivity, at the expense of [a] sense of the reality of the world", as Sontag calls it.[801]

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[794] David Scott, "Tragedy's Time: Postemanciaption Futures Past and present", in: Rita Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 215.

[795] Mark McGurl, "The Posthuman Comedy", *Critical Inquiry* 38.3 (2012): 533-553.

[796] Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us* (London: Profile Books, 2020), p. 3.

[797] *Ibid*.

[798] *Ibid*., p. 6.

[799] Nick Bostrom, "Letter from Utopia" (2010), n.p.; available online at: https://www.nickbostrom.com/utopia.pdf (accessed 20/12/2023).

[800] Susan Sontag, "The Death of Tragedy (1961)", in: *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 13.

[801] *Ibid*., pp. 133-134.

George Steiner's stakes in *The Death of Tragedy* (also in 1961) are even higher. For him it is "absolute tragedy, the image of man as unwanted in life" as "almost unendurable to human reason and sensibility", embodied by only a handful of classical and early modern examples, that has 'died'.[802] As Steiner later recalls, in 1990:

> Absolute tragedy is very rare. It is a piece of dramatic literature (or art or music) founded rigorously on the postulate that human life is a fatality. It proclaims axiomatically that it is best not to be born or, failing that, to die young (…). In the absolute tragic, it is the crime of man that he is, that he exists. His naked presence and identity are transgressions. The absolutely tragic is, therefore, a negative ontology.[803]

It is in this sense that "the tragic absolute solicits suicide",[804] but not on a large scale it would seem, since, for Steiner, "the scale of modern violence and desolation is resistant to aesthetic form". According to a well-known, humanist, sensibility "we are made numb by the routine of shock pre-packaged, sanitized by the mass media and by the false authenticity of the immediate".[805] The "testing of theodicy" – the outrage against divine injustice and human suffering – is a lonely, individual and "singularly Western" affair, it seems: "It ministers to radical doubts and protests in a confrontation with the non- and inhuman, where these designations have two senses, ominously kindred: they mean that which is potent, more lasting, more ancient than man, and that which does not demonstrably share the ethics, the compassions, the self-examinations, the graces of pardon and of forgetting in humanness".[806] This is why neither the "Christian promise of salvation" nor "utopian socialism" will ever generate tragedy, because in absolute tragedy there can be "no reparation" in the face of "the searing mystery and outrage of innate evil, of a compulsion towards blindness and self-destruction incised irreparably in man and woman".[807] In short, tragedy in this absolute sense requires despair without hope. So, in theory, the prospects for a resurrection of tragedy are not that bad at all, should we fail to 'save the planet', it seems.

As a kind of reply to Steiner's tragic loss of tragedy, Terry Eagleton rather heretically opens his *Sweet Violence* by stating that tragedy is "unfashionable" because "there is an ontological depth and high seriousness about the genre which grates on the postmodern sensibility, with its unbearable lightness of being".[808] In fact, Eagleton is mocking the left's "nervousness" regarding tragedy despite its obvious and ubiquitous relevance for twentieth-century atrocities and global injustice, or, when "for most people today, tragedy means an actual occurrence, not a work of art".[809] What Eagleton sees at work in the tragic and tragedy, reminiscent of Camus, is a certain "tragic humanism", which he refers to in the conclusion to *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, in a chapter entitled "Culture and Barbarism":

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[802] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* [1961] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. xi-xii.

[803] George Steiner, "Absolute Tragedy (1990)", in: *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 129.

[804] *Ibid*., p. 129.

[805] Ibid., p. 134.

[806] *Ibid*., pp. 136-137.

[807] *Ibid*., p. 139.

[808] Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. ix. On the "unbearable lightness of being" and the ('tragic') death of the nonhuman animal see chapter 8 on Kundera in this volume.

[809] Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. 14.

> Tragic humanism shares liberal humanism's vision of the free flourishing of humanity; but it holds that this is possible only by confronting the very worst. The only affirmation of humanity worth having in the end is one which, like the disillusioned post-Restoration Milton, seriously wonders whether humanity is worth saving in the first place, and can see what Jonathan Swift's king of Brobdingnag has in mind when he describes the human species as an odious race of vermin. Tragic humanism, whether in its socialist, Christian, or psychoanalytic varieties, holds that only by a process of self-dispossession and radical remaking can humanity come into its own.[810]

In this sense, "tragic humanism" still very much haunts even posthumanism, especially at a time the worst (again) seems to be about to happen, when the 'ends of man' seem again nigh, for as Eagleton adds: "There are no guarantees that such a transfigured future will ever be born".[811] Basically, we are stuck with the tragic because there is no merit in easy achievements. Freedom needs to be hard-won otherwise there is no grandeur, no greatness. This allows for the double, tautological reading of the phrase 'the death of tragedy' – it is the very specific death or death threat (to the human) that tragedy is about while it is a genre or mode that is always already dead, unachievable, deferred. As such it might be from the essence of the 'ends of man' that the posthuman hails, as Catherine Malabou provocatively asks – returning to Derrida's famous essay about the "apocalyptic nature of man: its destruction is its truth. Its end is its end, its telos":[812]

> When we claim that the human is now behind us, that we are entering the posthuman age, that we are opening the 'interspecies dialogue', or that we cannot believe in cosmopolitanism for want of a universal concept of humanity, are we doing something other than trying to reconstitute, purify, re-elaborate a new essence of man?[813]

So are we condemned – qua human – to re-enact, tragically, even in our eternal search for the nonhuman other to reconfirm our 'essence' or 'truth' which is our 'end'? How to "stop creating new names for the human: *Dasein*, posthuman, whatever", Malabou asks? How to no longer seek "revenge from being human (…) from being humans (...). [W]ill we ever be able to be redeemed from the spirit of revenge and thus from our humanity"?[814]

Posthuman Death – the Death of the Posthuman

> One may detect a tragic potential in each bone of a vertebrate, because these bones are caught in the dilemma of freedom and failure of movement.[815]

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[810] Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 168-169.

[811] *Ibid*., p. 169.

[812] Catherine Malabou, "From the Overman to the Posthuman: How Many Ends?", in: Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller, eds., *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the Work of Catherine Malabou* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 63; Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man (1972)", in: *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 109-136.

[813] Malabou, "From the Overman to the Posthuman", p. 65.

[814] *Ibid*., pp. 66, 69.

[815] Pfeiffer, "The Tragic“, p. 24.

It is no surprise that transhumanists do not like tragedy. Tragedy is dependent on death and mortality. For transhumanists, death is the tragedy that needs to be overcome, eliminated, transcended. Whoever *believes* in tragedy, its inevitability, its unsurpassability, even only ironically, i.e. in its unachievability – the tragic as the always deferred perfect reconciliation with one's destiny – is indulging in "the pursuit of unhappiness".[816] Death remains the main 'scandal' – or the persistence of evil. All the more important to choose 'life', survival, to stave off extinction. To save lives, to save life, this remains the all-overruling imperative that governs COVID-19 politics, itself governed by a "sanitary definition of (biological) life", or 'desperate' biopolitics for "our post-tragic societies" in the face of a global (human) pandemic.[817] It is, ironically, the "denial of the tragic" in our risk-averse societies, so protective of life, that may prove fatal in the end, as Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine argues.[818] However, is hoping for a return of a "strategic" sense of the tragic the best way to "resist this transhumanism"?[819] Is not the real tragedy that tragedy will no longer be able to save the human? This is what *post*humanism seems to have ultimately recognised and embraced, namely that the tragic sense that informs humanism can neither be escaped nor indulged. There is no point in wishing for a return of a tragic understanding of life at the very moment the human of humanism has been identified as the main villain in the planetary history of life (and death).

So, as the humanist pathos recedes and the human, instead, becomes more and more pathetic, what actually remains of tragedy and the tragic? Here are some suggestions: a posthumanist sense of the tragic begins with the realization of human "contingency" and the "ontological void" this apparently leaves.[820] However, this void turns out to be an anthropocentric delusion designed to repress the proliferation and irreducible multiplicity of (nonhuman) ontologies. In this sense:

> Posthuman tragedy will never uphold traditional tragedy's grand anthropocentric designs. It seeks the more intimate ground of shared materiality.[821]

Or, as Brian Deyo writes, "[i]nsasmuch as tragedy encourages a collective recognition of our shared, mortal condition with our animal cousins, it may enliven our capacities for sympathy and love, thereby honouring the evolutionary heritage with which our species is so richly endowed".[822] This, in fact, implies that there is still a lot to learn from the experience of tragedy for the human. For a start, it might prompt a process one might call *un*learning to be human (in the humanist, anthropocentric, sense). An important 'lesson' is that the world without us, life after the human, *pace* Weisman, will almost certainly *not* 'miss us' much. 'Life' is unlikely to *care*. In this respect, in this radically *in*human (not *post*human) view – if that view was still a perspective conceivable for humans – the posthumanist, new materialist, recognition that human and nonhuman are inextricably 'entangled' might still be far too reassuring in suggesting at least some minimal form of human survival, even in the form of an evolutionary trace. This is what Claire Colebrook insinuates in her *Death of the PostHuman*:

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[816] Cf. Stephen D. Dowden, "Introduction: The Pursuit of Unhappiness", in: Dowden and Thomas P. Quinn, eds., *Tragedy and the Tragic in German Literature, Art, and Thought* (Rochester: Camden House, 2014), pp. 1-20.

[817] Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *La déraison sanitaire – Le Covid-19 et le culte de la vie par-dessus tout* (Lormont: Le Bord de l'Eau, 2020), p. 11.

[818] *Ibid*., pp. 27-41.

[819] *Ibid*., p. 33.

[820] Cf. Jörg Zirfas, "Kontingenz und Tragik", in: Zirfas and Eckart Liebau, eds., *Dramen der Moderne: Kontingenz und Tragik im Zeitalter der Freiheit* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010), pp. 9-30.

[821] Elin Diamond, "Churchill's Tragic Materialism; or, Imagining a Posthuman Tragedy", *PMLA* 129.4 (2014): 756.

[822] Brian Deyo, "Tragedy, Ecophobia, and Animality in the Anthropocene", in: Kyle Bladlow and Jennifer Ladino, eds., *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), p. 209.

> Is not the problem of both sides – the dire prediction that we are losing our capacity to synthesize ourselves and the posthuman affirmation that we are really, properly, nothing more than a dynamic power to perceive – that there is still (for all the talk of loss) a reliance on a normative notion of the human, whereas what is required is an inhuman perception?[823]

Posthumanism's impact on tragedy and the tragic affectivity that persists in the posthuman may in fact already be heard in Camus's 'sigh' that: "life can be magnificent and overwhelming – that is its whole tragedy".[824] As stirring as this may sound and despite all the perfect tragicness this insight might (still) bear, it nevertheless assumes that life *itself* may be, and may even understand itself as, tragic – which would be the ultimate anthropocentrism! Posthuman, nonhuman or even inhuman tragedy, if it is still about loss, might turn on the realisation that what may be irretrievably lost, after all, is the prospect of any catharsis.

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[823] Claire Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction*, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Open Humanities Press, 2014), pp. 21-22.

[824] Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Tody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 201.

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