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Keep Calm and Carry On Writing

Posthumanism and literature (still) don't go well together (with the exception of science fiction and cyberpunk, of course). Why is that so? To my knowledge there is only one introductory study on posthumanism that is specifically written from the point of view of literary studies (Nayar, 2014). I don't think that this is either a coincidence or due to some neglect or conservatism on behalf of literary scholars. It rather has something to do with the distinction – not always consciously upheld of course – between 'posthuman' and 'posthumanist', or 'the posthuman' (basically a (rhetorical) figure) and 'posthumanism' (a discourse or, if you prefer, a style; see my modest attempt at disentangling these two (Herbrechter, 2013)).

That the distinction between posthuman and posthumanist is one of rhetoric also seems somewhat counterintuitive. Isn't posthumanism all about cyborgs, AI, bio-nano-info-cogno technologies, enhancement, cyberpunk and the shedding of the (human/animal) body, leaving behind the 'meatworld' or basically 'transcending' the human altogether? Well, no, I would argue. That, precisely is *transhumanism* with its ideology of leaving some ill-defined or undefinable human condition behind and promising life, mind and body extension while generally leaving the existence of a (normally human) self-to-be-transcended – a very modern, 'liberal', Christian and thus Western idea – unproblematised. This idea of a human self with its whole problematic of agency and (self)reflexivity is not something one can or indeed should take for granted, jettison or 'extend' at will without proper consideration of the consequences. And one should certainly not trust technology, science, medicine,

evolution or the economy (and even worse, a combination of all of these) to create a smooth transition towards some better future. If the 'post-' in posthuman and posthumanism has any *critical* value it lies in the continued questioning of that which it posts – namely what it means to be 'human' in a time when the meaning of this word is (again) highly ideologised and used for legitimation processes of all kinds of political stances?

What indeed is or was this curious world view called 'humanism' that is associated with all kinds of values, practices, institutions, etc.? And it is precisely because 'literature' is or was one of these humanist institutions – maybe even the central one, and it is because rhetoric is one of its central practices or 'dispositifs' (as Foucault and Agamben would say), that posthumanism and literature (in the widest sense) form such an odd couple. While literature can certainly *imagine* posthuman figures and posthuman scenarios (even though film and increasingly computer/video games might already have a decisive edge here) it increasingly is having trouble to create some sort of empathy for a 'postliterate' mind with its new and fundamentally different (e.g. 'distributed') protagonists by literary means. And these literary (or fundamentally rhetorical or even 'poetic') means are increasingly struggling to appeal and do justice to, what Sidney Dobrin, the editor of *Writing Posthumanism, Posthumanist Writing*, had already referred to as 'postcomposition' and its requirements, in a time of *posthumanist* mediascapes. Mediascapes based on digital code, big data, hyperreading, networked selves, human-computer cognitive entanglement, etc., which all but abolish the 'subject' of rhetoric.

This is why it is so vital to distinguish between posthuman and posthumanist – the posthuman is easy: it is a matter of the (cultural-technological) imaginary. Posthumanist 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 climate change, global terror, resource depletion, biotechnology, a radical decline in biodiversity and radical technological change – all human-induced). *Critical* posthumanism is thus the attempt to think through various 'ends' of the human and its humanisms without shirking any of the responsibilities, without techno-utopianism, but also without giving into the ambient catastrophism.

Such is the promise of *Writing Posthumanism, Posthuman Writing* – at least to some extent. In what way is posthumanism (still) writing and has the meaning of writing and its human and humanist practices changed? In writing differently or otherwise can ‘we’ (or indeed should we?) bring about posthumanism or the posthuman? Or, as the second part of the title suggests, are there already posthuman forms of writing? Forms of writing that either take place without humans, and/or change what it means to be human, or redefine what the human *is*? One can imagine the scope and the ambition it would take to do justice to these questions and it would be unfair to ask one single collection of essays to engage with all of them. So this can only be a beginning of a long ‘deconstructive’ process of unthinking the human, as well as of the humanist foundations of the notion of ‘writing’. And it can only be a selection of some currently available examples of posthuman and posthumanist forms of writing. However, the good news is that, in this sense, the collection is quite representative: it engages 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 human-environment entanglement. And, at least in some cases, it also addresses the question of rhetoric and style as such. It is of course impossible in any review of an edited collection to discuss each contribution in detail and every reviewer including this one will have their specific favourites. So while I will focus on just a selection of essays let me also say that the quality, originality and depth of all the essays in this collection is remarkable and balanced.

I will inevitably start with the theoretical framing and staking out of the terrain in Sidney Dobrin’s introduction to the volume. Dobrin enters the topic through the dominant, i.e. ‘technological’, route towards posthumanism. Ever since Haraway’s metaphorical extension of the cyborg-figure towards the socio-cultural sphere (in her ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ of 1985) the question of rhetoric has been implicit within and central to the discussion about the posthuman and posthumanism (even if Pepperell’s ‘Posthuman Manifesto’ famously and quite wrongly claimed that posthumans were beings that do not get bogged down in arguments about language). Dobrin, like Haraway and all ‘technological’ posthumanists (even though Haraway has always carefully distanced herself from the label) arrive at this juncture through a metonymical displacement that is most famously expressed in Heidegger’s ‘etymological’ claim that the ‘essence of technology is nothing technological’ but instead involves

something transformatively 'po(i)etical' (2010). This substitution and condensation allows for a thinking of culture but also evolution as a collection of 'technologies' and of tool-use and social practices like 'writing' as forms of 'anthropotechnics' (Sloterdijk's term), i.e. a shared technical-transformative 'behaviour' that 'makes' 'us' 'human' (Sloterdijk, 2014). Posthumanism, in this context, would be the extension of writing beyond anthropotechnics to nonhuman writing processes (machinic, digital, animal, object, environmental, etc.). As Dobrin states, it is the 'technological interaction' between human and nonhuman subjects thus understood that challenges their distinction (5). For rhetoric this has two implications:

first, as posthumanism argues that technologies like evolution might now be controlled to influence evolutionary teleologies (the posthuman becoming/the transhuman), we should recognize that what have been assumed to be 'natural' events and processes can equally be deemed technological. Second (and imbricated within the first), is that within writing studies the inextricably bound and nebulous relationship between subject and technology a) renders subjectivity inseparable from technology, thus rendering the writing subject indistinguishable from writing and b) exposes writing (and circulation) as saturating not just the intellectual inquiry surrounding posthumanism, but the very phenomenological encounters all subjects, human, and non-human, posthuman and transhuman, have with the world, not to mention the very idea that there can even be something called 'subjectivity'. Such an understanding of technology lends to a rethinking of all technologies from the writing of genetic code and evolutionary circulation to the high-techne cyborg construction. (6)

This generalised form of writing already proposed by Derrida in his *De la grammatologie*, in 1968, as the most fundamental and ubiquitous cultural (post)anthropotechnics, seems to metaphorically underpin the necessarily *rhetorical* approach to posthumanism – and it also guarantees in a clever self-legitimizing move the continued relevance if not the increased importance of the institution of 'rhetoric' as such. There are of course powerful attempts to wrench the posthuman away from what could be seen as a re-inscription and re-invention of the poststructuralist 'prisonhouse of language' conundrum. Writing is not just any metaphor, it is a 'catachresis', a 'dead' (or zombie) metaphor, and thus a necessary and at once impossible one. But in its necessity lies

a transcendence – something that cannot be questioned and which is thus ‘ideological’. Of course, critique is ideologically motivated as well, just like the discourses it critiques. Critical posthumanism critiques humanism at an ideological level, which means critique (and its habits) need to be questioned in return – hence the need for self-reflexivity (even if that, following Latour’s critique of critique, is becoming a point of critique itself).

If this sounds like a critical ‘mess’, *Writing Posthumanism, Posthuman Writing* is right in the middle of it, but it also helps to show that there is still a lot of mileage in this discussion. It begins with a very powerful contribution by Lynn Worsham on animal studies and posthumanism and what she calls, after Derrida, the ‘logic of sacrifice’ that underlies or maybe even provokes ‘our’ anthropocentrism and speciesism. Animal studies, in Worsham’s sense, is not just concerned with ‘the catastrophe that is the systematic and relentless and ongoing exploitation, abuse, and killing of nonhuman animals’ (23), but also an investigation into ‘the deep and abiding connection between how we interact with and treat nonhuman others’ (23). She follows Derrida in starting from the logic of sacrifice as an explanation for human cruelty towards other animals and also cites Cary Wolfe’s influential take on a posthumanist (animal) ethics that explains that violence against other humans is closely connected with their ‘animalization’. And this animalization of some humans in certain contexts can only happen *because* of an established human exceptionalism, and which makes violence against animals ‘permissible’. But most importantly for the acceptance of the constant background of violence against (fellow) animals may be, as Worsham argues, is the way we keep repressing our own animality, for example through processes like ‘deflection’ (which ‘converts a difficulty of reality into a purely intellectual difficulty’ [28]), which substitutes the (irreducible) singularity of a living being for a category like ‘animal’ or ‘species’. And this process of (metaphorical or rhetorical) substitution is already a kind of ‘sacrifice’. Worsham’s chapter takes this starting point to elucidate the ‘prehistory of deflection’ of this sacrificial logic and of the ‘trauma’ that is anthropocentrism:

Much of what we mean by ‘human being’ or ‘human nature’ surely must be understood in terms of a long history of trauma, a history that produces post-traumatic symptoms that have endured for thousands of generations, symptoms that are in some part the legacy of our traumatic encounter with nonhuman animals. (42)

A posthuman(ist) ethics would constitute a working-through process of the violence that was necessary to 'become human' in the first place – and which, by the way, is a very good example of a posthumanism 'without' technology, by which I don't mean to downplay the role of technology in the process of 'hominization' or in becoming posthuman. However, at the traumatic beginning of humanness lies a 'pre-technological' primal scene (for which even something like 'originary technicity' must come too late) (Callus & Herbrechter, 2007).¹

The animal or biological side of posthumanism is also represented in a couple of the other contributions to the volume. Diane Davis, in her essay, deals with human 'exceptionalism' and the question of 'animal writing' in the context of primatology. And as part of the ongoing engagement with the question of (animal) embodiment (and what might be happening to it in the process of digital 'rematerialisation') – a central aspect to the discussion of posthumanism (cf. Halberstam and Livingston's *Posthuman Bodies*, and Haraway and Hayles, of course) – Michelle Ballif's essay revisits the posthuman figure of the zombie and 'zombie writing', while Kate Birdsall and Julie Drew's essay investigates the notion of the 'postsexual' subject by revisiting the cyborg and 'cyborg writing'. Sean Morley's witty piece on 'Becoming T@iled' bridges the 'biological' and the 'technological' (cf. Dobrin's introduction, p. 5), as (digital) media do in general. In focusing on the '@', or the 'monkey's tail', Morley provides an ironic twist to the usual 'cerebral' association between posthumans and the prosthetic function of the computer. Morley asks:

The savviest posthuman is one that never loses her ability to compute. Instead of leaving the body behind, what about the body's 'behind'? Instead of focusing on the head of the posthuman, we might focus on the 'post' of the posthuman – the tail. (134)

The tail is not just a 'phantom limb' that human bodies retain, it is also an important organ for communication, rhetoric and 'writing' (cf. the various 'moods' betrayed by a cat's (or dog's) tail, for example). By thus deliberately erasing the boundary between animal tail and computer-mind prosthesis – for which the puncept of the 't@il' stands – Morley moves the collection towards a notion of posthuman(ist) media, rhetoric and writing that is more fully explored in the following contributions.

Jeffery Rice speculates on the meaning of a posthumanist 'style' and its pedagogy: its 'disruptive' impact would necessarily lie in the 'rhetorical uncertainty' it would produce as a new 'horizon by which we think, and not the object of our thought' (170). As Rice rightly assumes, in my view, 'our posthuman relationships to writing persist only because they promise a chance to write the new' (172), which has of course serious implications for literature and posthumanism (as outlined above). One way in which these posthuman(ist) rhetorical forms of writing look in practice is presented in Jim Ridolfo's chapter on human-nonhuman interaction made possible through 'digital delivery' and the way this might afford remediations of 'analog' practices – a case study Ridolfo refers to is the role of pigeons in the use of smuggling digital cell phones into prisons. In a similar vein, the following contributions respectively look at the idea of 'object-oriented-rhetoric', neuroscientific 'brain writing', 'spam' as a non-authorial/nonhuman writing practice, and the ecology of 'cyborg vision'. They are thus all concerned with what digitalization affords in terms of extending the notion of writing and rhetoric through human and (machinic) nonhuman interaction. What I would like to focus on in the remainder of this review, however, is the last contribution, by Bruce Clarke, for reasons that, hopefully, will become obvious.

Bruce Clarke's take on posthumanism is a combination of Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan's post-Darwinian or 'Gaian' biology and systems theory. One very promising avenue towards the critique of anthropocentrism that posthumanism stands for runs through the kind of relativisation of biological and evolutionary exceptionalism usually attributed to the human species. Instead, Margulis and Sagan stress the centrality and ubiquity of microorganisms and the dynamic of autopoiesis as fundamental principles of evolution. The result is, what Clarke refers to as 'neocybernetic posthumanism', which he explains in the following way:

By neocybernetic posthumanism I mean to mark for that discourse a crucial distinction between first-order modes of posthumanism that are cybernetic per se. Cybernetic posthumanisms partake of the first-order cybernetic synthesis of information theory with the technosciences of communication and control systems. This earlier cybernetics of signal, noise, and feedback control still remains the primary frame around popular images of the posthuman. (276)

Second-order systems theory starts with the principle of 'observation of observation' or with the operational closure of a system, which is the precondition for something like self-awareness. Autopoiesis, as proposed by Maturana and Varela for biological and cognitive systems and by Luhmann also for social systems, thus becomes an ontological principle. It is through this move that biology and media become fused:

The self-construction of psychic systems is possible only in ongoing corporeal coupling with living systems, while the self-construction of social systems is possible only in ongoing mediatic relations to psychic systems. (278)

This allows for a thoroughly post- or nonanthropocentric and hence posthumanist approach to 'communication' or 'information' because 'individuals must couple themselves by means of material media to ahuman, supra-individual systems' in order to partake in communication (278-9). What second-order systems theory and (Derridean) deconstruction share – Clarke is following Cary Wolfe here – is precisely the notion of a 'writing' process that is prior to and in many ways exceeds the human in the sense that it constitutes 'ahuman externalities' that are 'always already in play the moment one speaks' (279). What is posthumanist about this at first maybe somewhat counter-intuitive combination of systems theory and deconstruction is that it

immerses the human once more into the multiplicity of environments constituted by the multiplicity of biotic and metabiotic systems for which the human has always been implicated. Writing itself is immersed into a sea of operational sentience, a welter of autopoietic cognitions, whether these are consciously immediate or socially delayed. (280)

The rest of Clarke's argument serves to show that Margulis and Sagan in their science-writing for non-scientists are engaged in a kind of writing that is informed by these ideas and also that they practically apply these ideas through an 'astute selection of expository and rhetorical techniques' (281), which Clarke refers to as 'posthumanist tropes'. Among these are the 'reversal of perspective' (or 'narrative peripeteia' in which the usual principle of subjectivity and agency are reversed) and 'pronominal manipulation' in the form of a destabilizing of the humanist 'we' – which contribute to a deconstruction of binary oppositions that underlie the humanist and anthropocentric value system and

produce or 'perform' a systemic entanglement and an autopoietic complexity between humans, nonhumans and their environments – which extends the notion of writing towards a planetary ethic of 'matter', understood as a 'physicochemical medium' (294).

One may be sceptical for all sorts of reasons of the psychobiological thrust of Clarke's attempt to wrest the notion of Gaia from its mythological and mystical baggage, but what his contribution does is take the duplicity of the title *Writing Posthumanism, Posthumanist Writing* seriously, literally, and in that respect, it is rightly placed as the last essay in this volume.

Endnote

¹ On the question of 'originary technicity' in Derrida see Bernard Stiegler's and Arthur Bradley's work.

References

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