

Posthumanism in Literature and Ecocriticism

Introduction

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Where does the posthuman dwell? At what address? And in what type of house?

These questions, borrowed from the opening of Deborah Amberson and Elena Past's essay on *Gadda's "Pasticciaccio" and the Knotted Posthuman Household*, tickle our *eco*-accustomed ears – ears that more often than not like to take ideas back to their earthly dwelling, something that the Greek all-too famously called *oikos*. In our case, however, to provide the right answer to these questions is definitely challenging and might require a little “veering”. The reason is simple: situated by definition in a mobile space of matter and meanings, the posthuman does not seem so prone to *dwell*. In fact, it moves, relentlessly shifting the boundaries of being and things, of ontology, epistemology, and even politics. And these boundaries, especially those between human and nonhuman, are not only shifting but also porous: based on the – biological, cultural, structural – combination of agencies flowing from, through, and alongside the human, the posthuman discloses a dimension in which “we” and “they” are caught together in an ontological dance whose choreography follows patterns of irredeemable hybridization and stubborn entanglement. In this mobile and uncertain dwelling, furthermore, the posthuman might not have a stable “address”, but it *does address* important issues: it addresses, for example, the alleged self-sufficiency of the human, the purported subsidiarity of the nonhuman, and the consistency of categorical essences and forms that hover over our visions and practices as if they had been demarcated *ab aeterno* by the hand of an inflexible taxonomist. Taking a closer look, finally, we can see that the posthuman's *house* is not only mobile and a bit shambolic, but also operationally open: open to transformations and revolutions, ready to wel-

come the natures, matters, and cultural agents that determine the existence of the human and accompany it in its biological and historical adventures. It is a *collective* house for “nomadic” comings and goings, and most of all for belonging-together and multiple becomings: its inhabitant and “name-bearer”, the posthuman subject is, in fact, “a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity” – a subject “based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building”, as Rosi Braidotti says in her beautiful interview with Cosetta Veronese. In other words, as its house is itinerant and accessible to numerous guests, including the elements, the posthuman subject is a restless and sociable agent, allergic to limitations and boundaries, and *ontologically* full of stories. A biocultural Picaro, one might say.

Thinking the posthuman and following the stories it allows us to see is the task that we have undertaken in this special issue of *Relations*. Deliberately, we editors have decided not to limit our exploration to the philosophical conceptualizations marking out the debate’s theoretical map, but to also delve into the critical and narrative potential of this illuminating ontological framework, which has found so much room in literary studies – especially those areas related to ecocriticism and the so-called “critical posthumanities”¹. If there is a basic premise of posthuman thinking, in fact, it is that the idea of the human is not Platonic in itself, but is always already *plotted*: interlaced with the nonhuman in a warp and woof of intricate, joint performances of “storied matter”. The posthuman is, to put it otherwise, the ontological *narrative* of the human in its infinite paths of entangled becoming with its others. Hence the idea of “narrative ontologies and ontological stories” that we have chosen as the collective title of this double issue, featuring a first part on *Literature and Ecocriticism* (guest-edited by Serenella Iovino) and a second part on *Theoretical Approaches* (guest-edited by Roberto Marchesini and Eleonora Adorni).

But, before we enter our respective rooms, let us wander a bit longer in this posthumanist house, whose blueprints were sketched in the last two

¹ In the posthumanist lineage of ecocritical studies can be situated collections such as *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008; *Prismatic Ecology*, edited by Jeffrey J. Cohen, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2013; *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014; *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, edited by Deborah Amber-son and Elena Past, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; *Elemental Ecocriticism*, edited by Jeffrey J. Cohen and Lowell Duckert, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015. A key addition to this burgeoning bibliography will be the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, edited by Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini. On “critical posthumanities” see, among others, Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén 2015.

decades of the 20th century by Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, N. Katherine Hayles, Bruno Latour, and Andrew Pickering, and whose construction continues into the present thanks to the work of other prominent thinkers such as Karen Barad, Roberto Marchesini, Cary Wolfe, Stacy Alaimo, Manuela Rossini, Serpil Oppermann, Heather Sullivan, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen – to quote just a few names. The major novelty in this cooperative edifice is that, finally putting the humanities in a rigorous conversation with technology and life sciences, animal and gender studies, posthumanism shows the radical incompleteness of the human, thus marking “a refusal to take the distinction between ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’ for granted, and to found analyses on this presumably fixed and inherent set of categories” (Barad 2007, 32). In stating the intention to move onto-ethico-epistemological discourse *past* the human, however, the project is not so much that of debunking the human altogether, but rather that of discarding the dogma of human exceptionalism – an exceptionalism which is connected to various forms of mastery, including of gender, species, and matters. As Serpil Oppermann has poignantly pointed out, in posthuman terms “agency, subjectivity, and intentionality are not sole attributes of human beings. Hence, the most obvious manifestations of posthumanism are in movements against the exploitation of women, animals, and the natural environment” (2013, 28). If humanism has therefore – perhaps beyond its initially liberating premises – turned into a discourse of verticality and power, posthumanism offers the chance for a “bioegalitarian turn” (Braidotti 2009, 526), allowing us “to move beyond the paradigm of humanist condescension and to engage meaningfully with animality, both human and nonhuman” (Amberson and Past 2014, 3). This seems to fully accomplish an incitement once launched by David Henry Thoreau, who said: “Man is altogether too much insisted on. The poet says the proper study of mankind is man. I say study to forget all that – take wider views of the universe. That is the egotism of the race” (Thoreau 1962, 369).

The way posthumanist studies help us take wider views of the universe beyond “the egotism of the race” is, however, not simply by finding refuge in a wilderness “out there”, but by exploring the recesses of the “in-house” wilderness within and across the human. An easy example is the alien symbiosis of our microbiome: a composite landscape residing inside our bodies, where “human” cells are outnumbered by thousands of species of fungi, archaea, and anaerobic bacteria, that – by digesting our food, cleaning our blood, counteracting toxins, and hydrating our skin – are simply indispensable to our being alive. To see this co-presence is not just a way to “bypass the metaphysics of substance and its corollary, the dialectic of otherness” (Braidotti 2009, 526); it becomes the incontrovertible sign that

existing as humans means, literally, going past the boundaries of human “nature”. This implies rejecting the essentialist separation between the human and the nonhuman, and emphasizing their hybridizations, their cooperative configurations, and their active interplay. But that every human experience depends on and produces hybridizations is true on many levels, even beyond the onto-cultural shock of admitting that we host “strange strangers” (Morton 2010) inside our bodies. It is evident in the “evolving interfaces between humans, machines and prosthetic extensions” (Callus, Herbrechter, and Rossini 2014, 103) or, more in general, if we look at the complex predicaments of material entities and discursive practices that are stratified in what we call “culture” – something which, structurally and co-evolutionarily, is “the outcome of a process of hybridization with an otherness” (Marchesini 2002, 15, translated by S. Iovino). Not only the human, but also culture and nature are confluent, co-emergent, and defining each other in mutual relations. With its onto-epistemological “irony” (Sullivan 2014), the posthumanist approach dodges therefore the “Great Divide” of nature *and* culture by exposing their co-construction: there is no simple juxtaposition or *mirroring* between the two terms, but a combined “mesh”, an interplay, a tangle. Donna Haraway’s powerful term *natureculture* says it all.

Such vision pictures a wildly dynamic world: a world not only characterized by the steady “negotiation of our bodily boundaries in relationship to other bodies and the surrounding matter in the environment” (Sullivan 2014, 92), but also a world whose ontological categories are performed rather than given, and where mixing with “anotherness” is the dynamic destination of being. In this communitarian space, different forms of agency and materiality feed each other, and humans are parts of a constellation of beings, things, events, concepts, and signs. Existence is thus composed of the “force of collective life” (Wheeler 2006, 30), and this force is expressive: if culture is an ongoing process of hybridization with nature, a continuous formation of *naturecultures*, the force of life is also a force of signs and information, a *semiotic* force. It is a potential of stories inbuilt into matter. This world is not only a world of material emergences, but is also a world that becomes meaningful because meaning co-emerges with matter, as the confluent discourses of biosemiotics and the new materialisms have also shown². The narrative landscape of posthumanism is thus a

² First developed in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce and Jakob von Uexküll, biosemiotics is “the study of signs and significance in all living things” (Wheeler 2006, 19). As Timo Maran put it, “sign processes take place not only in human culture but also everywhere in nature [...]. *Meaning is the organising principle of nature*” (Maran 2006, 455, 461). Therefore, “all living things – from the humblest forms of single-cell life upward –

landscape of encounters, where “the organism-environment coupling is a form of conversation” (Wheeler 2006, 126), and where the human is constitutionally responsive to “a universe which is – and perhaps always has been – ‘perfused with signs’” (Wheeler 2006, 155). The fact that there is information and communication within every fragment of existing materiality implies even more that, at all levels – from cells up to complex collectives – our relationship with the world is one of conjoined determination: “The world makes us in one and the same process in which we make the world”, as Andrew Pickering wrote (1995, 26).

In this knotted dimension of exchanging natures, the human is no longer at the origin of the action, but is itself the result of intersecting agencies and meanings. Its very gist is that of a material-discursive sociability, built “through the pleasurable connection with the other, with the different, with whatever is able to produce new states of instability, thus reinforcing the human strive to conjugate with the world” (Marchesini 2002, 70, translated by S. Iovino). And this connection, this “sequence of conjugative events between an evolving subject and a selective otherness” (Marchesini 2002, 49, translated by S. Iovino) is the plot of the stories we now want to tell.

The encounter of posthumanism with literature and ecocriticism is almost spontaneous. As Serpil Oppermann writes in her essay, “With their intersecting stories and theories, posthumanism and ecocriticism have something in common: they introduce changes in the way materiality, agency and nature are conceived”. This is particularly true after the opening out of *material ecocriticism*. According to this perspective, inspired by the onto-epistemology of the new materialisms, material phenomena are knots in a broad web of agencies, which can be interpreted as producing narratives: “All matter [...] is a ‘storied matter’. It is a material ‘mesh’ of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 1-2). That this is necessarily confluent with a vision that, like the posthumanist view, is meant to overcome our “historic” solitude, is evident: in line with posthumanism, in fact, *this* ecocriticism and the literary imagination it heeds augment the population of our cultural world, relocating the human in a wider web of connections by staging a “performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction, experience, and knowledge” (Braidotti 2013, 38).

[...] are engaged in sign relations” (Wheeler 2012, 271). For a panoramic view on the new materialisms, see Coole and Frost 2010.

But, from the very body of material ecocriticism, a “posthuman” one has recently made its appearance. As Jeffrey Cohen writes, “the project of posthuman ecocriticism is to attend to animal, water, stone, forest, and world – and not to deny force, thought, agency, emergence or thriving to any of these entities, all of which act, all of which are story-producing” (Cohen forthcoming, n.p.). The essays included in our first issue are the perfect epitome of this project. In their different styles and with their different foci, in fact, they all share this sense of distributed agency, of hybrid subjects and matters, which are “story-producing” in that they expressively challenge the idea of mute distinctions and inflexible boundaries between human and nonhuman matters. All these essays, written by internationally recognized theorists and critics, share the same preoccupation, namely, that “We need new genealogies, alternative theoretical and legal representations of the new kinship system and adequate narratives to live up to this challenge” (Braidotti 2013, 80).

In the opening contribution, *From Posthumanism to Posthuman Ecocriticism*, Serpil Oppermann explores more closely the impact of the posthuman turn on ecocriticism. Combining the perspectives of the new materialisms and posthumanism, her essay proposes posthuman ecocriticism as an engaged and “diffractive” mode of *reading* the co-evolution of organisms and inorganic matter in their hybrid configurations. By becoming posthuman, ecocriticism expands and enhances material ecocritical visions, considering such material agencies as biophotons, nanoelements, and intelligent machines that are expressively agentic, story-filled and co-emergent with *homo sapiens*. Oppermann reads these agencies against examples taken from literary works that she defines as “posthuman novels”, integrating the role of bio-technologies and life sciences in the humanities debate and performing an immersion in territories within which to think about human/nonhuman/inhuman natures.

The second contribution, *Threatening Animals?* by Heather I. Sullivan, explores the double meaning of “threatening” that comes from and towards us, as our industrial practices and energy use present the greatest threat to all multi-celled species today. Considering our animal bodies and agencies as part of the earth’s corporeality, Sullivan addresses German texts presenting human-animal interactions in the Anthropocene’s span. These authors’ animal portrayals, she maintains, unsettle our expectations of who is threatening whom and how. In Goethe’s *Novella*, for example, the escaped circus tiger is shot after fleeing a threatening fire in the bustling marketplace – emblematic for emerging modern capitalism – while the lion is tamed by music. Stifter’s *Brigitta* presents an apparently pastoral peace threatened by wolves in the winter, whereas Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* re-

shapes the idea of “becoming animal”. Karen Duve’s *Rain Novel* and Ilija Trojanow’s *Melting Ice*, recent cli-fi narratives, oddly juxtapose the human threat to the world’s climate with endlessly proliferating slugs and biting penguins that impact the novels’ final outcomes. Finally, the resurgence of wild boars in Berlin’s urban space in the past few years provides a material textuality of human and other-than-human-animal agents interacting in an urban ecology that threatens, in compelling fashion, our bodily, species, and urban boundaries with posthuman renegotiations.

With the third essay, *The Posthuman that Could Have Been: Mary Shelley’s Creature*, we are in the context of classic English literature, here explored by Margarita Carretero-González. The essay concentrates on the problematic meeting between the Creature and his maker – a meeting marked by both ethical compassion and *ontological* fear. By closely analyzing the central part of Shelley’s novel, Carretero shows that in the encounter of these two species, however, only one seems to have truly “met” the other: the Creature has indeed *become with* his maker in a way that Victor fails to reciprocate. Following the Creature’s own account and not only Dr. Frankenstein’s anthropocentric narrative, readers have the opportunity to see – and meet – this performing “Otherness” outside the category of “monster”, thus establishing an ethical connection with him. Interestingly, Carretero’s analysis also sheds light on the coexistence of transhuman and posthuman discourses in the novel: in expressing his desire to create an improved species, Victor indeed echoes the transhuman discourses of improvement of humankind, while remaining unable to make the transition to the posthuman phase which would grant humanness to his Creature.

With the fourth essay, *Gadda’s “Pasticciaccio” and the Knotted Posthuman Household*, the attention is drawn to Italian literature. The authors, already mentioned in the beginning of this editorial, are Deborah Amberson and Elena Past, whose co-edited book, *Thinking Italian Animals*, is reviewed by Emiliano Guaraldo at the end of this issue. Moving from the final scenes of Carlo Emilio Gadda’s *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, taking place in a dilapidated Roman house, the authors use this weird *oikos* as a dynamic lens for viewing the unremitting tension between interiority and exteriority, anthropic and geological time, human and posthuman in the Gaddian universe. Penetrating the protagonist’s porous body and entangling him with his surroundings, this lowly house’s nomadic “squalor” helps uncover a “dirty” nonhuman universe, where alongside the tragedy of individual human death, decomposition actively recomposes the landscape and nourishes literary composition. As Amberson and Past cunningly show, the articulate beings, spaces, and forces that cross Gadda’s

writing – from Fascism to jewels, clucking chickens to lightning strikes – inhabit a tragic world, tainted by the burden of our finite solitude, where nevertheless creative entanglement with all that is chaotic and eternally vital reveals – as posthumanism know – that we were never alone.

And that we were never *ontologically* alone is also the tenet of the last essay, *Posthuman Spaces of Relation: Literary Responses to the Species Boundary in Primate Literature*, by Diana Villanueva Romero. An expert in primatology literature, Villanueva Romero stresses the importance of contemporary literary representations of primate relationships in our way of thinking about the “animal”. Here, again, the interlacement of ontology and narrative plays a major role. Since the beginning of the animal liberation movement in the 1970s and thanks to the development of cognitive ethology, primatology, and trans-species psychology, fiction writers have produced works that develop alternative ways of thinking about the nonhuman primate. Contextualizing literary animal studies within the horizon of the posthuman turn, Villanueva’s article presents an overview of the main ape motifs that populate Anglophone literatures. Thanks to its imaginative power, the author finally maintains, literature compels us to transcend the category “human” and enter into a posthuman age that is more in tune with the hybrid and porous nature of our species.

This first issue culminates with a final, crowning piece: *Can the Humanities Become Posthuman?*, the splendid interview that Cosetta Veronese conducted with one of our Muses of many posthuman years, the philosopher Rosi Braidotti. The review section is also very rich, featuring three book reviews and a comprehensive review essay, which are all in fruitful conversation with the issues raised in the essay section.

But, before we move from this eco-literary room to the nearby theoretical space, allow me a final narrative reference, taken from one of the champions of literary immanence, Jorge Luis Borges. In his tale *The Immortal* Borges wrote: “They knew that, over an infinitely long span of time, all things happen to all men. [...] Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, hero, philosopher, demon and world – which is a long-winded way of saying that I am not” (Borges 2000, 14). The posthuman subject, in its plotted being, is not immortal. Quite the opposite: it is a transitory form amidst endless other forms. But at the same time and for this very reason, like Borges’s immortal, it is everything. Or better, it is all things in their “differential becoming” (Barad 2007, 353), including the human. If Borges keeps subjectivity as a transcendental form of experience, regardless of individuality, the posthuman breaks the ties of subjectivity as a fixed category and extends the field of experience beyond the ego. What makes experience possible is the inner co-implication of matter and meaning which charac-

terizes the universe's creativity. This co-implication is narratable not only "all the way up: from cell to society" (Wheeler 2006, 120), but even from the level of matter's organization before cells even existed. Therefore, every living being is not just metaphysically, but physically and structurally connected with "all things". It is "all things", it is the world in its differentiating complexity. Enhancing both our literary imagination and our critical insights, the posthuman is a way to contain, and give voice to, all these things. Crowded, pervasive, and nomadic as it might be, *this* is the house in (and of) which we are.

Trouble the boundaries and enmesh the cosmos, but even a posthuman ecology remains housebound. (Cohen forthcoming, n.p.)

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