

Proto-Posthumanisms

Marija Grech

Western thinkers have long been fascinated by the possibility of creating new forms of organic and inorganic life. In Plato, Homer and Aristotle we read of the living bronze and gold statues modelled by the master craftsman Daedalus and the divine blacksmith Hephaestus, while in Ovid's tales it is Pygmalion that fashions himself an ivory girl to love. Marking the beginnings of science fiction, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* imbues a patchwork monster with the breath of life, a fictional Thomas Edison creates what he believes to be the perfect female android in *Tomorrow's Eve*, and in Karel Čapek's play from 1920, the Rossum factory churns out hundreds of thousands of robots that are indistinguishable from human beings. Influenced by Darwin's revolutionary understanding of species and evolutionary change, other writers chose to turn their attention towards the human and began to reflect on the possible evolution of the human species into new forms of being. H. G. Wells contemplated the possible degeneration of man into creatures that descended from, but could no longer be recognised as, human, while in *The Coming Race* Edward Bulwer-Lytton created an elaborate fictional world in which mankind is succeeded by highly-technologized creatures whose capabilities far exceed those of *Homo sapiens*.

In their dreams of extending human consciousness and the experience of human life to previously inanimate objects and in their portrayal of the human species evolving into new forms of being, these texts question the limits and boundaries of the human and seem to pre-empt our own contemporary fascination with the figure of the posthuman. Over recent decades, cultural theorists have used the notion of the posthuman to describe what they perceive to be a new phase in the history of the human, or, even, a new phase that succeeds human history in its entirety. N. Katherine Hayles, for instance, identifies a 'shift from the human to the posthuman' in contemporary society and describes the posthuman subject as 'an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction'. Hayles links this emerging form of subjectivity to advances in information technology and cybernetics, but clarifies that the posthuman subject should not merely be thought of as a 'literal cyborg'. It is not just the human body or the human mind that is being altered by our relationship with technology, our experience and understanding of what it means to be human is also being transformed.¹

Other thinkers have foretold of the coming of a technological singularity that will utterly transform the nature of the human species to a point where it can no longer be considered human. Transhumanists such as Hans Moravec and Raymond Kurzweil foresee a future in which human beings biotechnologically evolve into new species or are replaced by their own advanced technological creations.² Whether superseded by

¹ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 3-4.

² See, for example, Hans Moravec's *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) and *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity is Near: When Humans*

biological or technological ‘descendants’ (to use a term favoured by Moravec), humankind as we know it will become obsolete and, according to these thinkers, will make way for a post-human form of being that will be ‘as radically different from our human past as we humans are from the lower animals’.³

In contradistinction to these visions of a transhumanist evolution or revolution, several theorists have chosen to problematize the ‘post’ of posthumanism, showing how the human is and always has been inherently other to itself. Rather than focussing on what will supposedly come *after* the human, these thinkers seek to question and critique the liberal humanist assumptions that underlie contemporary understandings of the human. In so doing, they position their work as being concerned with a post-*humanism*, rather than with the post-*human* as such. As Cary Wolfe points out, understood in this way, posthumanism ‘isn’t posthuman at all—in the sense of being “after” our embodiment has been transcended—but it is only posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism’.⁴ Rather than positioning itself as a discourse that comes *after* the human or, indeed, simply after humanism, posthumanism is that which insinuates itself in both past and future, looking backwards as much as it looks forward. This brand of posthumanism (which can be broadly referred to as *critical* posthumanism) shows how contemporary discourses about the future of the human and technology are often rooted in the assumptions, ideas, values and aspirations of the past. Simultaneously, it looks back upon the history and evolution of the species, language, technology and human thought to forge new paths and find new ways of thinking and talking about the human.

As a form of thinking that looks both backwards and forwards, pointing out assumptions derived from the past in discourses about the future while simultaneously revisiting this past to find ways into the future, posthumanism is that which, in the words of Wolfe, ‘comes both before and after’⁵—that which comes before and after humanism and the human, certainly, but also, more curiously, that which comes before and after *itself*. The title of this issue draws attention to the ambiguous temporality of a posthumanism that is always already ‘proto’, a posthumanism that always pre-empts itself and that always also points to that which exceeds it, one that finds its germinal self in that which it is not and that is itself also a germ of something else.

In one sense, this issue invites readers to think about the ways that contemporary posthumanist thought is pre-empted in philosophical and literary works from earlier periods, works that in their old age reveal the germinal roots of a more contemporary understanding of the human. In so doing, it seeks to explore a genealogy of posthumanism, tracing the origins of posthumanist thought into the past and drawing on this past to rethink the posthumanist concerns of our present day. But, in addition to this, the conflation of the prefixes *proto-* and *post-* also questions and challenges the very notion of genealogy itself. Discussing posthumanism, R. L. Rutsky contends that this ‘cannot simply be identified as a culture or age that comes “after” the human, for the very idea of such a passage, however measured or qualified it may be, continues to

Transcend Biology (London: Viking Penguin, 2005) and *How to Create a Mind: The Secret of Human Thought Revealed* (London: Viking Penguin, 2012).

³ Vernor Vinge, ‘The Coming Technological Singularity’, *Vision-21: Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering in the Era of Cyberspace*, NASA Conference Publication 10129 (Westlake, OH: NASA Lewis Research Center, 1993), 12; available at

<http://ntrs.nasa.gov/archive/nasa/casi.ntrs.nasa.gov/19940022855.pdf> [accessed 23 July, 2015].

⁴ Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xv.

⁵ Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xv.

rely upon a humanist narrative of historical change'.⁶ If one is to truly speak of posthumanism—or speak *as* posthuman—then this must necessarily entail a new understanding of time and history. By drawing attention to the strange temporality of a *post* that is always already a *proto*, and a *proto* that is always already a *post*, the issue invites a rethinking of the very notions of human temporality, evolution, and genealogy.

The first half of this issue looks at proto-posthumanist tendencies in works of literature. Stefan Herbrechter opens the issue with an exploration of how Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Derrida's interpretation of this play in *Specters of Marx* can help us think through some of the concerns of contemporary posthumanist politics. Betsy Bolton's reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' in the article that follows examines how many of the structures and strategies of contemporary posthumanist thought are anticipated in the work of this Romantic poet. This genealogical investigation into the roots of posthumanist theory is extended to Alexander Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock' with James Cochran's analysis of how this poem creates cyborgian spaces of transgression that question the dualities and binary oppositions associated with traditional conceptions of the human. The issue then turns to a reading of T.S. Eliot's 'Four Quartets' by Nozomi Saito who draws attention to the transgressiveness of Eliot's poem and argues for a posthumanism informed by the socially responsible ways of thinking and being proposed by this text. The section on 'Literary Proto-Posthumanism' ends with Caleb Sivyer's comparative reading of J. G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and the suggestion that posthumanism is always a *proto*-posthumanism that is implied in that which has come before it.

The second half of the issue turns to philosophy and contemporary culture with Hilary Bergen's investigation into the commodification of femininity in the digital world. Bergen traces a lineage linking digital assistants, such as Apple's Siri, to the figure of the female cyborg in early film and literature to argue that the so-called posthuman technologies of our age remain steeped in highly codified and exploitative gendered power relations. In the article that follows, Anthony Miccoli addresses the idea of 'progress' that is so central to contemporary discussions on the future of the human and the value of human enhancement. Through a rereading of Descartes's *Discourse on the Method*, Miccoli argues for an ethical technoproggressivism that would be wholly committed to enriching human experience, rather than seeking to merely extend or recreate human life. The question of progress and the improvement of the human species also informs Aaron Aquilina's article on Kant, evolution and posthumanism. The article looks at techno-biological processes of sexual reproduction and gene expression to investigate how far Kant's writings can be said to prefigure contemporary posthumanist thought. The final article in this section by Angus McBlane turns to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to investigate the role of subjectivity and corporeality in contemporary posthumanist discourse. The issue as a whole is brought to a close with a coda by Ivan Callus that considers the use (and possible redundancy) of the prefix 'proto-' in the term 'proto-posthumanism' and reflects on the nature of prefiguration implied by this term.

Reviews of two recent books on posthumanism are also included in this issue: Nina Lyon's review of Zoe Jaques's *Children's Literature and the Posthuman* (New York: Routledge, 2015) and Arleen Ionescu's review-article of *Narrating Life* –

⁶ R. L. Rutsky, 'Mutation, History and Fantasy in the Posthuman', *Subject Matters: A Journal of Communication and the Self* 3.2/4.1 (2007): 107.

Experiments with Human and Animal Bodies in Literature, Science and Art, ed. Stefan Herbrechter and Elisabeth Friis (Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016).

References

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999.

Moravec, Hans. *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Moravec, Hans. *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Kurzweil, Ray. *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. London: Viking Penguin, 2005.

Kurzweil, Ray. *How to Create a Mind: The Secret of Human Thought Revealed*. London: Viking Penguin, 2012.

Rutsky, R. L. 'Mutation, History and Fantasy in the Posthuman'. *Subject Matters: A Journal of Communication and the Self* 3.2/4.1 (2007): 99-112.

Vinge, Vernor. 'The Coming Technological Singularity'. *Vision-21: Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering in the Era of Cyberspace*. NASA Conference Publication 10129. Westlake, OH: NASA Lewis Research Center, 1993. 12. Available at <http://ntrs.nasa.gov/archive/nasa/casi.ntrs.nasa.gov/19940022855.pdf>. Accessed 23 July, 2015.

Wolfe, Cary. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.