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MODERNISM, NARRATIVE AND HUMANISM

In *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*, Paul Sheehan attempts to re-define modernist narrative for the twenty-first century. For Sheehan modernism presents a major form of critique of the fundamental presumptions of humanism. By pairing key modernist writers with philosophical critics of the humanist tradition, he shows how modernists sought to discover humanism's inhuman potential. He examines the development of narrative during the modernist period and sets it against, among others, the nineteenth-century philosophical writings of Schopenhauer, Darwin and Nietzsche. Focusing on the major novels and poetics of Conrad, Lawrence, Woolf and Beckett, Sheehan investigates these writers' mistrust of humanist orthodoxy and their consequent transformations and disfigurements of narrative order. He reveals the crucial link between the modernist novel's narrative concerns and its philosophical orientation in a book that will be of compelling interest to scholars of modernism and literary theory.

PAUL SHEEHAN is a Sydney-based writer and researcher. He studied at Birkbeck College, London, and has published articles on Dickens and Beckett.

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For G. R. and J. S. Sheehan

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homó sum: humani níl a me alienúm puto.
(I am a man, I count nothing human foreign to me.)

Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*

Nothing human is foreign to us, once we have digested the racing news.

Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*

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Preface

To have humanism we must first be convinced of our humanity. As we move further into decadence this becomes more difficult.

Thomas Pynchon¹

The decades since the end of the Second World War have been notable for precipitating, among other radical changes, a thoroughgoing reappraisal of what it means to be human. Changes in political practice and intellectual rationale, and recent scientific endeavours such as the Genome Project and embryonic-stem-cell research, have raised serious doubts as to how secure that elusive category, the ‘human’, really is. And as the measure of these changes is still being taken, postwar theoretical discourse has transformed the human from a discrete, intuitively understood idea (or ideal) into a site of contention, where notions of hybridity, contradiction and dispersion circulate freely and abundantly. The more knowledge we have of the human, it now seems, the more it slides from our grasp.

Since the Renaissance first brought the notion into modern Western consciousness, the various humanisms that have burgeoned – Enlightenment, liberal, existential – have assumed a degree of certainty about what it means to be human. In most instances this is supported by appeals to intrinsic rational, moral and axiological dimensions, and a belief in a universal human nature and/or condition. A major repercussion of the *Shoah* in the decades since it became public knowledge – and probably for a long time still to come – has been a foreclosure of that certainty, a breakdown of the categories of rationality, morality, etc., laying them open to sustained critical scrutiny and revalencing. Thus the Kantian stress on the free use of reason (‘The *public* use of one’s reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among human beings’)² is, within the purview of such iconoclasts as Zygmunt Bauman, a significant contributor to the ideology that made the death

camps possible.³ But if one certainty has been shaken – the certainty of what is irreducibly human – its place has been taken by a different kind of certainty: that we know what the *inhuman* is, and what it does (it constructs our understanding of the ‘human’). This is the bailiwick of theoretical and philosophical antihumanism, whose replacement categories betoken a diversity that hides their common certitude: language, discourse, desire, being, *natura*, the unconscious, social formation, and technology, to cite some of the more prominent and widely disseminated.

The present project aims to show that this concern with the human, though quickened by the theoretical and philosophical response to the unprecedented horrors of the *Shoah*, has its roots in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. Specifically, it emerges from the cultural upheavals that have been historicised as the ‘crises of modernism’. Thus the misology of critical commentators such as Bauman has its pre-Holocaust counterparts in a number of modernist avatars. This is not, however, to impute any ethical parity to Bauman’s critique of the discourses of reason and, say, D. H. Lawrence’s perorations of misanthropy. It is rather to illustrate two things. First, to show that the critical engagement with the concept of the human is not an exclusively postwar skirmish, but a century-long project, whose roots are concealed by the shifting cultural formations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And second, to demonstrate that this earlier engagement was crucial, not incidental, in establishing the conditions of possibility for the post-war antihumanism dominating continental theory and philosophy in its various present-day guises.

The name I have given this critical engagement is ‘anthropometric’ – literally, the measure of the size and proportions of the human body, adapted here to mean the taking of the measure of the ‘human’: as transcendental category, empirical reality, or malleable, indeterminate becoming. An anthropometric tradition can be identified because the taking of this measure – in the terms I am about to sketch out – has, over the past 150 years, become increasingly problematic.

The defining feature of anthropometric thought is a bifurcation: the human no longer possesses an *a priori* connection to humanism. Formerly, there was an unspoken agreement, a commensurability, between the naming of the human and the doctrine(s) of humanism. To speak of or to write about the human was, perforce, to assume particular modes of conduct, embodied in a clutch of political and ethical guidelines befitting such a noble being. Similarly, any doctrine identifiable as humanist

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invoked a knowable entity, a possessor of certain endemic, existential attributes. As Emmanuel Levinas has observed: ‘In a wide sense, humanism signified the recognition of an invariable essence named “Man”.’⁴ The anthropometric philosophers and writers at the heart of the discussion abjure this congenital human-humanism connection.

On the one hand, ‘humanism without the human’ is evident in the work of Schopenhauer. For him, the absence of a given being identifiable as ‘human’ is no obstacle to his prescribing doctrines for appropriate ethical and political behaviour, or what might be summed up as ethics without metaphysics. On the other hand, ‘the human without humanism’ (or ‘the human without the “human” ’), takes apart the metaphysical and axiological assumptions that have accreted around the term (category, concept) ‘human’. Its chief exponents are Nietzsche and Heidegger, who both evinced either a frustrating vagueness or a wily reticence in establishing a blueprint for appropriate human conduct. Their works display, indeed, a notorious absence of any specific prescription for social, political or ethical renewal – despite the fact that both have at various times inspired, if that is the right word, socio-political commentary. This could be described as being without metaphysics, attempting as it does to break with the humanist figure of ‘metaphysical man’.

These two strands are not intended to exhaust all anthropometric thought in the past 150 years. The four novelists under consideration – Conrad, Lawrence, Woolf and Beckett – though undeniably anthropometric, fall outside both lines of enquiry. Part of their purpose within this project, therefore, is to comment on these lines, to establish the boundaries between humanist and counterhumanist attitudes of mind. Beyond the role played by these four writers, the chief purpose in identifying an anthropometric tradition in nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought is to delineate a coherent genealogy, a process whereby these often diverse critics of the ‘human’ can be seen to possess certain affinities.

A parallel might be made with the argument Margot Norris mounts in *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*. Attacking the traditional separation of animal and human, of ‘creatural and cultural man’,⁵ she brings to life a biocentric era spanning the years from 1830 to 1930. The biocentric art that emerged during this period ‘required an unromantic, unsentimental (although not entirely unsympathetic) fidelity to the animal’s alien otherness’.⁶ There are significant differences from the anthropometric era, however, and they are threefold. Firstly, and most obviously, the dates are slightly later, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and

ending in the mid-twentieth. Secondly, the animal is only one category of anthropometrism (the mechanical and the transcendent are equally as important). Thirdly, Norris assays artists as well as writers and philosophers, whereas the present argument focuses purely on literary modernism, and how narrative is manifested and deformed by novelists and philosophers. Nevertheless, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination* is an important precedent for the anthropometric genealogy, in its recognition that some drastic rethinking of human and inhuman has taken place.

As with much discussion of philosophy and literature, there are border crossings between the two territories. The major prose works of Conrad, Lawrence, Woolf and Beckett are treated with philosophical seriousness, to explore their reflections on human being within the constellation of their narrative poetics. And the converse also applies. The key figures of post-Kantian continental philosophy are examined for their dispositions towards narrative, and for the inevitable 'aesthetic' effect – performative, poetic, nondiscursive – produced by their revocation of the *diktats* of reason. No claim is made that these very different thinkers are bound together by some profoundly common essence. Although they all address what is other than human, the modalities of that address are for the most part diverse, and the differences cannot be ignored; indeed, they are used here to give form and substance to the imaginary anthropometric tradition I have sketched out. The complexity of thought underlying the hundred-year-long development of the human problematic, from the 1850s to the 1950s, cannot be neatly contained in a single narrative thread, nor followed through a single historical modality. The issues that are raised do, finally, dovetail into one another, but only after they have undergone comparative analysis with different lines of thought and cultural forms in different eras.

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