



Marius Viorel Pușcaș

## From Narrative Art to Discourse A Posthuman Approach in *Firmin: Adventures of a Metropolitan Lowlife*

---

**Abstract:** The essay inquires whether the non-human perspective in storytelling is still a narrative technique or it leads to a discursive approach, according to the shifts that have occurred in our episteme of post-. Taking into consideration the various perspectives of posthumanism in terms of a paradigmatic structure, the human's relation with otherness is reshaped and the main goal of our society is to regain human identity as part of existence. Having this in mind, we discuss Sam Savage's novel *Firmin: Adventures of a Metropolitan Lowlife* as a new form of discourse in posthuman times.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism; Non-human; Identity; Otherness; Marginality.

**MARIUS VIOREL PUȘCAȘ**

Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
marius\_puscas91@yahoo.com

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2018.34.18

These days, making a statement about *posthumanism* is a quite challenging task due to the permanent changes which occur in the cultural and philosophical background of the term; even so, these happen rather frequently. The posthuman condition became a “common” subject and an increasing number of research areas are intertwined with it. Still, there remains the problem of conceptualizing the term, because theoretical posthumanism gives birth to alternative forms of the posthuman, alongside multiple genealogies thereof. The image of *The Human*, placed as an emblematic figure at the center of humanism, spontaneously brings to posthumanism a more iconic and intricate figure: the *post-human*, which embodies various forms of manifestation (non-human, inhuman, anti-human, etc.).

It is difficult to trace a significant and exhaustive definition of the concept, looking back, for instance, to the Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum* or to the more recent sociological view of the human as *citizen, rights holder*,<sup>1</sup> etc. This amount of concreteness pushed the human being towards its *post-state*, a redundant structure



with a predisposition for a general blockage. However, from the actual structures of posthumanism derives a more complex form of existence with socio-political and philosophical influences, which raises the problem of the basic unit on which we ground the common reference for our species. For instance, there are different forms and embodiments of humanism with different perspectives on life that are placed in various epistemes, and the same variety of approaches is characteristic of posthumanism:

The romantic and positivistic Humanisms through which the European bourgeoisies established their hegemonies over (modernity), the revolutionary Humanism that shook the world and the liberal Humanism that sought to tame it, the Humanism of the Nazis and the Humanisms of their victims and opponents, the antihumanist Humanism of Heidegger and the humanist antihumanism of Foucault and Althusser, the secularist Humanism of Huxley and Dawkins or the posthumanism of Gibson and Haraway.<sup>2</sup>

First of all, the iconic figure of humanity is postulated by the definition of Man, and here we should mention Protagoras' *measure of all things* and Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (the phallogocentric perspective of Man is irrelevant to this essay's approach, so it will not be taken into consideration). In this case, we have the image of the *human* as a measure of all things or as an archetype, a structure developed in society by the cultural, social and political backgrounds. The identity of Man

came from a list of features that allows him to be different. Those can be seen as a fundamental posture of the human being or, as Rosi Braidotti claims, *a set of mental, discursive and spiritual values*.<sup>3</sup> But how can those be used in the fields of robotics, neuroscience and biogenetics? These mainstream cultural topics take the *post-human* to a futuristic approach closer to trans-humanism and techno-transcendence. This is the main direction of posthumanism and enhancement based on technology prevails over ontological assessment.

In academic culture, posthumanism arrives along with the abnegation of *Vitruvian Man as the measure of all things*. In those circumstances, a new critical theory emerges, changing the relation of human beings with themselves and with the entire existence. In other words, the boundaries between the human and the non-human have to be reorganized not within a binary opposition between the given (nature) and the constructed (culture) of individuals, but rather by looking at the integrational self-organization of human beings into a larger system. This essay stresses the importance of a theoretical basis for the establishment of posthumanism as a paradigm of our era and its purpose is to present some small shifts that have great importance for critical approaches to the post-human.

### The New Terms of Posthumanism

The new perspective highlights how individuals adapt their existence to the new paradigm and embarks upon conceptually redefining what it means to be human in a redundant episteme of *posts-*. As we can see, posthumanism is a problem of



theory rather than an existential issue, because theoreticians have to redefine Man. The obsolete anthropocentrism opens the way for the post-human, who is constantly transforming and has to keep up with alert evolution. That entails a continuous reshaping in the matter of self-reflection. Changing the problem's data from a universal model and state of reference for the humanity (which covers both the given "nature" and the created "culture") offered by humanism, to a self-reflexive humanity based on the relation with the other (including the human and the non-human), means a really long distance between humanism and posthumanism, with various cultural, social, political, economic and technological influences. Rosi Braidotti presents the evolution of humanity in this direction<sup>4</sup> and in order to define this particular behavior of the post-human being, the author uses the concept of *nomadic subjectivity*.<sup>5</sup>

Braidotti's approach to human identity in posthumanism is based on a dynamic form of subjectivity. This nomadic identity brings along the lack of a static and stable construction of consciousness. The subjects must adapt themselves to the context, so that when the context is in a fast and continuous evolution, the perception of self-existence is always a new one. The alternation of self-identities brings a state of dislocation that pushes the human into an inherent nomadism. This may be related to the alert evolution of technology, which forces the human to keep up with it. This brings forth permanent agitation and instability. The amount of information is immense and human nature cannot handle it, so technology comes with the solution of "human enhancement." This enhancement

requires transformations in the individual's subjective identity and until one becomes accommodated with the new posture, such transformations bring about feelings of alienation, but they also generate nomadism. In those terms, the human's relation with the environment has changed. The position of superiority is dismissed and a more cohesive perspective is adopted.

Nomadic subjectivity should not be seen from a pejorative perspective, because it defines the current situation of humanity. Permanent changes and the evolution that challenges humanistic stability are now accepted as states of mind. The post-human turn does not allow a binary opposition such as human/non-human in terms of definitions, so there has to be another way of speaking about and developing the critical theory concerning the post-human paradigm. This new type of discourse is based on introspection. The postulated *nomadic subjectivity* creates a link between the *individual* and *the other* (seen as human or non-human, or even life as an independent entity which will exist even after the demise of the human subject). This simultaneous co-presence of the human and otherness may define the ethics of humanity. Their relation may offer a solution to post-anthropocentrism, which, in other words, is exactly the post-human equation.

As it has been previously said, the post-anthropocentric perspective is seen as an important cognitive step for posthumanism. This step has led to a lack of concreteness and eliminated the pillar which sustained the positioning of the human above all other forms of existence. Without a solid base, the reconstruction of subjectivity tends toward a more virtual sphere for sustainability. In these circumstances,



subjectivity is ambivalent and maintains a real value with an empirical status – territorialized existential territories – and a virtual identity which merges with the real one “de-territorialized incorporeal universes.”<sup>6</sup> A combined vision of the materialistic identity with a virtual one may result in the new form of identity which posthumanism proclaims. As Braidotti says:

A qualitative step forward is necessary if we want subjectivity to escape the regime of commodification that is the trait of our historical era, and experiment with virtual possibilities. We need to become the sorts of subjects who actively desire to reinvent subjectivity as a set of mutant values and to draw our pleasure from that, not from the perpetuation of familiar regimes.<sup>7</sup>

Thinking differently is the main purpose of the theoretical field of posthumanism and de-familiarization in regards to the classicized structures is promoted as a method in theory. In praxis, de-familiarization may be seen as the *step forward* which brings reconciliation between all kinds of human manifestations. The radical form of self-identity construction based on cultural common sense brings about forms of inadequacies. A system that cannot accept that there are exceptions to its rules will cause marginalization. Marginality is an inferior structure that puts pressure on the dominant majority and this creates a permanent conflict between the parts. Sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia are the most common forms of marginalization in our days. These manifestations in society are derived from the fear of losing cultural identity. From Braidotti’s point of view:

Humanism historically developed into a civilizational model, which shaped a certain idea of Europe as coinciding with the universalizing powers of self-reflexive reason. [...] This self-aggrandizing vision assumes that Europe is not just a geo-political location, but rather a universal attribute of the human mind that can lend its quality to any suitable object.<sup>8</sup>

As can be seen, the existence of a central model for humanity, shaped by a set of rigorous rules, is not enough: it has to be spread and imposed among entire human existence. This action has an opposite effect and widens the gap between the central element(s) and the marginalized ones. Thanks to the posthuman’s openness to otherness, a new vision can be created about marginality that promotes new types of discourses to disclaim the structures which sustain a society based on a universal majority and reluctant margins. The current socio-political context, combined with the interconnected posthumanist paradigm, leads to a form of conciliation in social life. For the academic domain, it can emphasize a path for theoretical approaches.

### The Non-human in Narrative

This essay will analyze the socio-cultural space from a different perspective in the literature area. We started to speak about posthumanism as a matter of context rather than a historical period. This is why we encountered some difficulties when using the prefix *post-* for referring to a period which is not necessarily one that succeeds humanism. The post-human paradigm (even if it is assumed to be rooted in



humanism) does not assume a total repudiation of the previous period, but rather it tries to develop a discourse which would redefine the human race and place it onto a different path, not end it. In literature and fiction everything is possible and if we think of the perspective of reconfiguring self-subjectivity in a virtual field, in literary fiction those coordinates are easily set in “practice.” We had in mind the image of the *non-human* when we started this essay and we will reduce the area of research to literary theory.

For instance, there are books which use a non-human narrator to tell the story from a perspective that is not frequently encountered. The use of a non-human narrator in a novel as a narrative practice can be commonly found in books for children. However, there are examples of novels addressed to grownups with a non-human narrator. In these situations, the purpose of choosing a type of non-human narrator (a machine, an animal, an alien, etc.) has to do with a need for a different perception. The human perspective does not fit the author’s will and a new way of seeing and telling the story is used, employing the non-human vision. This is partly a narrative issue, but considering the fact that the cultural context occurs with a new form of relation with the non-human subjectivity, it can be extended to the discursive purpose and this idea should be seen from a critical point of view.

Until posthumanism, using a non-human perspective in order to tell a story was comprehended as a narrative technique which could come with an unusual and captivating vision of the world. But this perspective was considered an exercise of depersonalization, a breach between the

author and the narrative voice. Even if the narrator was a non-human entity, his voice was still humanistic, transposed into another shape in order to break the rules of existence and to settle an inappropriate type of relation with the reader. This narrative technique can also be seen as a mask for the narrator who needs a different point of view and shape in order to tell the story, and the act of narration is more suggestive than the story itself.

The turn which occurred with the posthumanist paradigm could change the perspective on the purpose of choosing a non-human narrator. If the human being redefines the self-identity by relating its subjectivity to the entire existence, then perhaps using a non-human perspective and consciousness is not just a narrative strategy. This could be a posthuman discourse which allows the human subject to express itself either as being in a strong relation with the entire existence or as being an integrant part of it. In this way, the self-identity of the human subject may be fulfilled with the assumed subjectivity of *otherness*. This is not just an exercise of understanding non-human existence, it is a togetherness that allows us, as human beings, to find our place in the complex structure of the world. This type of discourse includes an entire selection of relationships with various structures from which the identity of humankind can emerge.

Sam Savage, a novelist who gained notoriety with his second novel *Firmin: Adventures of a Metropolitan Lowlife*, published in 2006, provides an example of the non-human perspective in storytelling. He chose as the narrative voice that of a rat. It is a non-human perspective but at the same time it is a non-human with pejorative



assumptions. The plot is about a rat (which is also the narrator) that describes in a subjective manner his life from the time before *he* (this pronoun has been chosen on purpose) was born, until the end of his days. He has a form of disease which affects him in a strange way and that is what makes him special. His brain grows in a way that he will start to think as a human.

At the beginning, he describes the way he was born and his struggle to survive in a hard and disgusting world, being the thirteenth child of a rat with twelve nipples. To satisfy his hunger, he starts to eat pages from books. *Finnegans Wake*, which is assumed to be unreadable, opens Firmin's appetite for reading. At the beginning he eats and reads with a huge appetite, "crude, orgiastic, unfocused and piggy devourings"<sup>9</sup> but soon he starts to notice the "different flavor of each book." The appetite for food and reading overlaps at some point. As it can be seen, he transforms the act of reading into a carnal action and he evaluates the taste of food on the same scale with the literary quality of a book. When he eats poison, he describes it as: "A little pile of cylindrical neon green pellets. They smelled good, so I nibbled. They were oddly delicious, tasting like a blend of Velveeta cheese, hot asphalt, and Proust."<sup>10</sup>

His entire life revolves around the titles that he has managed to read (there are plenty of them because he lives in the basement of a bookshop at this time of his life). Accessing a non-human perception with a human subjectivity, Savage manages to put a non-human entity in a human skin. The first idea based on this novel comes from the narrator's position. He embraces the conscience of a rat, a symbol for marginality. This is an example of virtual

human self-identification with *otherness*. It is a combination of human consciousness and a rat-nature that tends to get shaped by inner transformations. The rat has an academic thinking and he overcomes his nature. He uses the term "rat" with disgust and addresses his family when they are leaving with harsh words: "So long, you bunch of cocksuckers, you subhuman jerks."<sup>11</sup>

With each step he takes, the distance between him and his nature is bigger. It is a sort of an ontological de-familiarization and a reshaping of his nature. He is attracted by strippers and pornographic film characters. He admires women in a carnal way, and he has instinctive impulses when he goes to the cinema and sees them in their whole beauty. Some of his instincts have merged with the new consciousness but his metamorphosis is just on the inside. He acts as if he were a human being, but what bothers him is the fact that he cannot communicate with humans. He reads a lot and wants to interact with humans, but there is a sort of a fence between them. He assumes that the owner of the bookshop is his friend and after an attempt of leaving some messages for him, Firmin almost gets killed. By thinking like a human, he denies his true nature, but he cannot break through it. But even though he cannot communicate with humankind, the reader is able to get to his thought:

Despite my intelligence, my tact, the delicacy and refinement of my feelings, my growing erudition, I reminded a creature of great disabilities. Reading is one thing, speaking is another, and I don't mean public speaking. I do not mean that I suffered from



social phobia, though that was in fact the case. No, I mean actual vocal utterance – of that I was not capable. Loquacious to the point of chatter, I was condemned to silence. All the beautiful sentences flying around in my head like butterflies were in fact flying in a cage they could never get out of.<sup>12</sup>

Firmin is a nonconformist rat that is living a human life but in the body of a rat. Speaking in terms of already classicized concepts, the human and the rat are at opposite poles. In spite of this opposition, the result is a complex existence, “a mixed character” and he has managed to accept that. His name is based on a pun, *Firmin* – vermin, which makes him feel his nature more like a torture, but he eventually accepts his existence. This is the nature of his existential malaise. He gets in contact with several characters, both rats and humans, and he can distinguish the differences between them. Even if he is stuck in the *rat-tus society*, his goal is to be accepted by the human race, from which he has borrowed his consciousness. After being poisoned in a local park, he is caught by a science fiction author, Jerry Magoon, who wrote about alien intelligent rats. Firmin is treated well but what bothers him is the fact that Magoon does not believe that he can read. The rat plays a toy piano and reads but the writer assumes that he is just mimicking human behavior.

The rat emphasizes what makes humans different from the rest of the living creatures, namely the ability to speak and communicate using the articulated language. The rat can communicate with his family, but his nature does not allow him

to speak with humans. Here one can see the fine distinction between the given and the created. From this point, he realizes that each individual creates his own vision about the world, and this image is just a construct. Relating to the author’s formation in *beat generation*, the rat is also “a revolutionary at heart.”<sup>13</sup> He speaks about revolution, about political movements, about important books, in a universal sense: the Bible, the Koran, The Bhagavad Gita, the Book of the Dead, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution. Those are books of a global interest, but each of them is valorized in a different episteme. In Braidotti’s vision:

This is a theory of mixture, hybridity and cosmopolitanism that is resolutely non-racial. [...] This view rejects individualism, but also asserts an equally strong distance from relativism or nihilistic defeatism. It promotes an ethical bond of an altogether different sort from the self-interests of an individual subject, as defined along the canonical lines of classical Humanism. A posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or “earth” others, by removing the obstacle of self-centered individualism.<sup>14</sup>

Even if *Firmin* is a fictional work, it problematizes the relationship between humans themselves and between humans with non-humans. This is a solution to the apocalyptic vision of posthumanism about humanity. Changing the posthumanism from the historical period after the human disappearance into a theoretical paradigm





brings changes in the way of human thinking. What Bradiotti assumes in her book about the *nomadic subjectivity* of humankind and the revelation of human identity deriving from a relation with otherness is exemplified in Sam Savage's novel. The cultural context in which the author chose a non-human voice and character for his story allows us a posthumanistic interpretation. A shift can be traced in terms of discursive structures: the narrative voice is not just taking on a role, it involves and transforms this avatar into an identity. The author takes a position against the movements that are the main reason for our fragmented society.

At the end of the story, Firmin dreams of a conversation with Ginger Rogers, and this comes as a last wish in this life. At this moment, Scollay Square from around the bookstore is in its final step of demolition and all of Firmin's haunts disappear. This is a combined ending of the rat and his environment, showing the relation of the non-human (who accessed a human conscience) with the material part of his world. "Everyone has two sides, a dark and a light [...] everyone is his own enemy."<sup>15</sup> This is how a natural togetherness works towards the virtual realization of identity. Firmin's storytelling position is against all discourses that involve racism, sexism, xenophobia, etc. A keyword of the entire story is the term *infestation*. If we look carefully, Firmin's life revolves around this concept and at a point he defines the term: "Infested is an interesting word. Regular people don't infest, couldn't infest if they tried. Nobody infests except fleas, rats and Jews. When you infest, you are just asking for it."<sup>16</sup>

This is a symbol of all that has been marginalized by the fanatic forms of

humanism. Now social outcasts are blamed for their methods and for the effects they produce, but this marginality was the pillar which sustained humankind's identity based on comparison. Now, in the context of a revitalized posthumanity, this marginality is still an identity source for humankind, but its relation with the majority category makes the difference. If in the past the majority category disavowed and rejected marginality, the posthumanist context comes with a more permissive negotiation of such positions. This openness towards marginality breaks the boundaries between the major and minor structures of society and of entire existence. The actual socio-cultural context offers the possibility of taking on an identity, and not having it imposed by the dominant structures. "The difference between assuming a mask, which is always an opportunity for freedom, and having it forced upon one, is the difference between a refuge and a prison."<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

Firmin is a mirrored image of the human subject who takes on a non-human consciousness and tries to reshape his boundaries according to the new identity. In other words, the new terms of posthumanism allow humanity the possibility of resurrection. This means that humanity, as we essentially understand it, is not dismissed and replaced by a new form of existence, but is reshaped conceptually. Post-anthropocentrism, a critical approach within the sphere of posthumanism, takes the idea of humanity to the next level, emerging from the need of identification with other states of existence in the world. This means that, in posthumanism,





humanity is not dissolved: only the Vitruvian image of the huMAN, as the *measure of all things*, is.

In this essay we tried to highlight this aspect in Sam Savage's *Firmin*. The shift that posthumanism has brought along allows for a new approach in literary theory. The act of narration is linked directly to the structure of discourse. Moreover, when a text has a subjective narrator, the reader has access to the narrator's consciousness. Choosing a non-human narrator, which in most of the cases is subjective, represents an exercise in depersonalization for the author. According to the new posthumanist

perspective, using a non-human point of view is no longer a practice that allows the writer to gain distance from his identity, but the other way around, meaning that this way he, as a human being, can redefine his true nature. According to what has been previously said, non-human narratives propose a new discourse which promotes some of the new directions in the theoretical approach of posthumanism: openness towards otherness, a regaining of human identity, the reintegration of the human as a part of the complex system of life, and the rise of a new theoretical structure in academic thinking.

## WORKS CITED

- Braidotti, Rosi, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013  
Davies, Tony, *Humanism*, New York, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001  
Ferrando, Francesca, "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism and New Materialism, Differences and Relations," *Existenz*, Vol. 8, no. 2/3013, <https://existenz.us/volumes/Vol.8-2Ferrando.html> (accessed December 20, 2017)  
Graham, Elaine L., *Representations of the Post/Human*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002  
Guattari, Felix, *Chaosmosis, An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, Sydney, Power Publications, 1995  
Hayles, Katherine, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999  
Kurzweil, Ray, *The Singularity is Near – When Humans Transcend Biology*, New York, Viking 2005  
Savage, Sam, *Firmin: Adventures of a Metropolitan Lowlife*, A Weidenfeld & Nicolson ebook, 2008

---

## NOTES

1. Cary Wolfe, *Posthumanities*, apud. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, p.1.
2. Tony Davies, *Humanism*, New York Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001, pp. 130-131.
3. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, p.14.
4. *Ibidem*.
5. *Ibidem*.
6. Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis. An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, Sydney, Power Publications, 1995, p. 26.
7. Braidotti, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
8. *Ibidem*, pp.14-15.
9. Sam Savage, *Firmin: Adventures of a Metropolitan lowlife*, A Weidenfeld & Nicolson ebook, 2008, p. 18.
10. *Ibidem*, p.75.
11. *Ibidem*, p.34.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 38.



13. *Ibidem*, p. 53.
14. Braidotti, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
15. Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 136.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 117.