258

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The Posthuman: Literary Usages and Embryonic Forms

Abstract: This article investigates the sense of the posthuman in the collective imaginary as reflected in literary usage. Such a perspective makes it possible to avoid the self-referential character of discourses on the posthuman, particularly within feminist and postmodern posthumanism. On the basis of a working, pragmatic definition of the posthuman derived from usage, the study traces a diachronic analysis of its embryonic forms and critiques the widely accepted but reductive Frankensteinian genealogy.

Keywords: Posthuman; Literary Theory; Human Condition; Transhumanism; Posthumanism; Imaginary.

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1. Introduction

On September 3rd, 2025, on the sidelines of the Chinese military parade marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, CCTV microphones captured a private exchange between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin about the possibility of extended human longevity. Xi Jinping was reported to have said, "now people in their 70s are still young", and Vladimir Putin was reported to have replied, "in a few years, with the development of biotechnology, human organs can be constantly transplanted so that (people) can live younger and younger, and even become immortal"[1]. This light-hearted conversation between the two heads of state triggered countless reactions, and nouns such as immortal, cyborg, superhuman, and posthuman experienced a sudden surge in global media discourse over the following days[2]. Beyond the anecdote, the universal fascination with the topic – and the already rich imaginary long nourished by literature and, more recently, by cinema – fully explains this intense and widespread enthusiasm.

Parallel to the explosive immediacy of media information and commentary, theoretical and critical academic discourses have been developing within the slower

temporal framework of the humanities, aiming in particular to enhance our ability to grasp intellectually the stakes and dimensions of any extension, updating, or rejection of the boundaries by which we might still define the human. The main objective of this paper is precisely to interrogate the conceptual gap between the human and the posthuman in our collective imaginary. It seeks, more specifically, to establish an operative, non-Western-centered definition of the posthuman that will then allow us to identify its embryonic forms in the literary testimonies of the past. Such an undertaking must, of course, begin with a pragmatic delimitation of what constitutes the common denominator of all humans and thus forms the core of the concept.

2. The Human Root of Feminist and Postmodern Posthumanisms

Whether one speaks of feminist posthumanism (initiated by Donna Haraway[3]) or of postmodernist posthumanism (whose major representative is arguably Cary Wolfe[4]), the entire discourse constructed around the posthuman rests on a critique of an endemic conception of the human, one that is tied exclusively to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. Although the central aim of these contemporary discourses is precisely to challenge this Enlightenment notion of the human, posthumanist authors seem, albeit unintentionally, to reproduce an Western-centric reflex. Indeed, by constructing the concept of the "posthuman" on the basis of the Enlightenment human, these posthumanist thinkers (Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe, Karen Barad) end up contaminating the neologism with the very Western-centered dimension they seek to critique. As a result, the concept of the posthuman – limited to a narrow opposition to the European humanist human – becomes far less intuitive for a non-Western audience shaped by a different history of ideas.

To this initial reservation is added the fact that defining the *posthuman* as a discourse opposed to the human – where the human itself is understood as a humanist discourse on the human – entails a high degree of discursive self-referentiality and an equally excessive adlinguistic extension in relation to its referent. This extension is symptomatic of what Jacques Ellul[5], and after him Gilbert Hottois[6], have called *the language inflation*.

Without entirely depriving the notion of the posthuman of the contributions of the Western-centered and inflationary definition at issue, the task now is to propose a more operational and less culturally situated understanding. To this end, it is imperative to draw upon a more universal idea of the human. Whether one takes as a reference the *Li* of Confucianism, the *Dao* of Daoism, the *heimarmenê* of Stoic philosophy, the *huduth* of Islamic thought, or the *dukkha* and *anicca* of Buddhism, the interpretation of the human as the being subject to a specific condition, the human condition, appears, *mutatis mutandis*, as a timeless and worldwide leitmotif. It is therefore from this perspective that we propose to define the human: the human is, in terms of limitations, that which is subject to the human condition. This condition is itself defined by the combination of the ensemble of the human's natural limitations and the species-specific *Umwelt*[7].

In defining the posthuman, we will therefore keep in mind this inclusive and pragmatic conception of the human. Particular attention will be given to what writers themselves have called "posthuman" in their literary works. This makes it possible to work directly with what the concept already owes to the literary and collective imaginary. This definitional proposal will consequently be grounded in literary usage.

3. Some Literary Occurrences

In the following discussion, the focus is placed on four literary works whose authors directly employed the word *posthuman* or its derivatives (posthumanity, posthumanist, posthumanism). Two of these texts are Anglo-Saxon: *The Shadow Out of Time* (1936) by H. P. Lovecraft, probably the site of the very first occurrence of the word in literature, and *Schismatrix Plus* (1985) by Bruce Sterling. The other two are more recent Francophone works: *Une vie sans fin* (2018) by Frédéric Beigbeder and *Le crépuscule des licornes* (2023) by Julie Girard.

The first posthuman explicitly designated as such was, in fact, a literary posthuman. Indeed, not until 1936 did readers of the renowned horror and science-fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft encounter, for the first time, while turning the pages of *The Shadow Out of Time*, the neologism *posthuman*. This novel of a little over one hundred pages combines science with horror and the marvelous in a temporal game of prolepsis and analepsis that can prove disorienting on a first reading: "I shivered at the mysteries the past may conceal, and trembled at the menaces the future may bring forth. What was hinted in the speech of post-human entities of the fate of mankind produced such an le effect on me that I will not set it down here[8]".

Within this fictional world, the posthuman is represented by a kind of beetle: "This species does not originate from humans but is nonetheless tied to their history in that it is linked to their extinction. It replaces them by becoming the new dominant species on Earth"[9]. Lovecraft also uses the expression *pre-human* when referring to a being anterior and apparently inferior to the human species. The character traits of *robustness* and *civilizational power* convey the motif of superiority:

> Of earthly minds there were […] three from the furry pre-human Hyperborean worshippers of Tsathoggua; […] five from the hardy coleopterous species immediately following mankind, to which the Great Race was some day to transfer its keenest minds en masse in the face of horrible peril; and several from different branches of humanity[10].

Lovecraft imagines other superior lifeforms that clearly escape the bounds of the human condition. *The Great Race*, for example, which appears in the passage cited above, is a highly malleable being that surpasses the limits of anything resembling the contours of our condition. It is freed from the constraints of time and moves across eras. It emancipates itself from matter, from the body, and exists in the form of spirit. This species is also not subject to gender binary, its individuals being neither male nor female. The posthuman is not, however, at the summit of the hierarchy of beings, for its advent, though it

marks the end of the human era, is ultimately only one further evolutionary stage to be claimed by the Great Race: "By the time of the posthuman beetle race it would be quite dead. And yet, as I thought of the native legends, I trembled anew"[11].

In the idea conveyed by these initial occurrences, the representation of the posthuman reflects, consequently, five motifs that are relatively interrelated. First, there is the motif of rupture: whether through the narrative of the end of an era, the emergence of another species, or phylogenesis (if we return to the Great Race). Second, there is the motif of specificity (or of the species): the figure representing the posthuman is not an exceptional or singular creature. The posthuman is a collective of individuals forming a specific category, or what we would commonly call, in this case, a species. Third, we find the motif of posteriority: it is a posterity of the after-human, with the human always serving as a point of orientation. Fourth, there is the motif of superiority: it manifests itself through the posthuman's greater civilizational power and robustness. Fifth, we must underline the combined motif of refuge and emancipation: the Great Race safeguards its minds by transferring them to a new host – the posthuman, in this case – when the old world is overtaken.

The essential elements of these motifs are found, with a few differences, in Bruce Sterling's posthuman in *Schismatrix Plus*. Through this science-fiction text, the reader follows Abelard Lindsay, a diplomat and political intriguer, who experiences through several decades of interstellar upheavals, in a future where the Earth has lost its centrality and where the population has split into two great factions. Here, the posthuman is not limited to a superior species. It involves at least three dimensions: ontological, ideological/political, and metaphysical.

When Sterling uses *posthuman* as an adjective or noun, "aren't we Posthuman"[12]? or "posthuman solar system"[13], he designates, from an ontological point of view, entities that are truly modified, biologically and cybernetically. He also designates a modality linked to the mind: "It had become a second subconscious, a buried, intuitive layer below her posthuman mode of thought"[14]. The posthuman mode here refers to an concrete modification at the level of cognition that departs from the human mode considered as standard. The author also uses "posthumanism": "The future belongs to Posthumanism, Lindsay"[15], "She embraced Posthumanism"[16]. Posthumanism here refers to an ideological and political dimension. In the novel, posthumanism is a project, a political current to which the characters may adhere or not. Finally, the reader also finds the form *posthumanist*: "I had been trained for years to specialize in them, but they had taken on beauty and meaning for me only after my posthumanist enlightenment"[17]. By speaking of a "posthumanist enlightenment", the narrator opens a metaphysical, indeed teleological dimension linked to the ideas of transcendence developed throughout the novel.

In general, in *Schismatrix Plus*, posthuman refers at once to beings truly transformed on the biological/cybernetic/cognitive plane, to an ideological and political doctrine (Posthumanism) that values projects of cosmic scope, and to a metaphysical horizon of *surpassing*, where the human condition as we understand it gives way to radically other modes of existence.

At the end of the twentieth century, the expression *posthumain*/posthuman/post-human began to proliferate. It appeared in a variety of contexts. Instances of the term can be found in art exhibitions, such as *Post Human* (1992) by Jeffrey Deitch, or in academic studies (articles or essays), for example Robert Pepperell's *The Post-Human Condition* (1997). But it is above all in the twenty-first century that the term became common in literature, the media, and the university.

Contemporary Francophone literary occurrences display uses that are markedly more realistic and less rooted in escapism than those observed in the texts mentioned above. In *Une vie sans fin* (2018) by Frédéric Beigbeder, the posthuman is primarily linked to the dream of amortality, the narrator-protagonist's foremost quest: "There are many methods to defeat death, but they are reserved for a few Chinese or Californian billionaires. Better to be a living posthuman than a human reduced to dust"[18]. The author even proposes a comparative table listing, on one side, the characteristics of the human being and, on the other, those of the posthuman. Among the main differences, the reader finds greater longevity, multiplied physical strength, brain–machine interfaces, corrected DNA, and so on. The posthuman thus essentially corresponds to the transhumanist idea of the enhanced human.

This same perspective of the gradual enhancement of the human species is present in *Le crépuscule des licornes* by Julie Girard. Through the character of Éléonore, a science journalist with a particular interest in new technologies, the reader follows the adventures of Juergen Gadamer, a physicist, former Google employee, and founder of Higgs World, a start-up seeking to revolutionize human communication by combining quantum computing and neural chips. In the transhumanist circles that the journalist frequents during her investigations, the human being – and especially the human brain – is viewed as naturally handicapped, suffering from numerous imperfections. It is therefore considered imperative to modify and enhance the human species:

> The human being is constantly subject to a dozen biases that impair their capacity for judgment. In addition to being biased, the human brain possesses only a limited capacity for abstraction. […] Our goal is to enhance the power of the human brain through the use of a quantum computer. The implant will enable this connection[19].

The human species is designated as a stage to be surpassed: "You, as a human, are only capable of anticipating two to three moves ahead"[20].

Julie Girard's entire novel is built around the ethical issues arising from an ongoing experiment intended to lead humanity toward the posthuman. Through the leitmotif of the evolution of the species, the author gradually reveals the dissensions among the novel's different voices and the principles guiding the characters. Éléonore remains critical of the claims made by the scientists she interviews, yet she also wonders whether this might be "the natural course of evolution"[21].

The word *posthuman* itself appears only once in the text, in the form of *posthumanité* (posthumanity). Yet this passage encapsulates the core of the novel's narrative

tension. This key scene stages the physicist Juergen in conversation with Aditya Vijay, the second-in-command of Neurathink (an obvious reference to Neuralink). Vijay proposes that Juergen combine his quantum technology with Neurathink's neural chips. The reader understands that the future of the human species depends on Juergen's answer: "Your technology combined with our implants would usher in the era of posthumanity"[22]. The individual and ontogenetic stories of Juergen, Éléonore, or Vijay, which in a conventional novel would constitute the heart of the fiction, are here relegated to the status of secondary plots. The main plot concerns phylogenesis. In this context, the posthuman designates an alternative evolutionary path based on new technologies aimed at enhancing the human being and freeing humanity from the *defects* of its condition.

4. From Literary Usage to Theory

The Francophone academia has recently seen the publication of several substantial studies that analyze the figure of the posthuman and its treatment in literature. In this context, we may cite, by way of illustration, *Le roman posthumain: Houellebecq, Dantec, Gibson, Ellis* (2010) by Maud Granger Remy, *Fictions and Theories of the Posthuman: From Creature to Concept* (2019), a doctoral dissertation by Carole Guesse, *Le Roman du posthumain: Parcours dans les littératures anglophones, francophones et hispanophones* (2020), a book – also derived from a dissertation – by Amaury Dehoux, as well as *The Cambridge Introduction to Literary Posthumanism* (2024) by Joseph Tabbi.

Amaury Dehoux proposes to distinguish, through an original typology, three categories of posthumans in literature. The first category concerns the posthuman shaped on the basis of an operation of *molding* or manipulation of the human being – through genetic engineering, for example. The second category relates to the cyborg, to any fusion of the human and the machine. The third and final category corresponds, for the author, to artificial intelligence. Amaury Dehoux defines the posthuman as "a being, any being, whose one or several usual faculties radically transcend those recognized in the traditional human. The notion itself and the definition it entails therefore place at the center the ideas of succession and surpassing"[23]. Although this conception can, to some extent, be reconciled with our own analysis, the proposed typology and a particular nuance in Dehoux's work nonetheless prompt us to clarify our argument.

It is necessary, through a commentary developed along two lines, to specify what leads us to partially redefine the notion. First, it is important to keep in mind that the ideas of species or collectivity are fundamental, from the very first occurrence of the term, in Lovecraft as well as in the other authors mentioned. Indeed, from a morphological standpoint, Lovecraft's neologism suggests a relationship and an association with the human species. It therefore seems more coherent to observe the categorical equivalence that exists morphologically between the two words: *human* and *posthuman*. The issue here is thus not to establish an opposition between a species (a collective entity) and an exceptional being (an individual entity), but rather between one species and another species. Second, the figures of the posthuman and their descriptions move

increasingly, within posthuman literature, away from the classical science-fiction tropes. The work of Nick Bostrom offers an illuminating case. A leading figure of the longtermist current of transhumanism and a major reference in posthuman thought, Nick Bostrom fictionalized, in his tale *The Fable of the Dragon-Tyrant* (2005), the phylogenetic narrative of the transhumanization of the human into the posthuman. In this text, humanity's triumph over the dragon – an allegory of death and senescence – frees the human being from the condition of mortality (or of aging) and grants access to *surpassing*. As has been shown, from a strictly morphological level, the term posthuman already contains the lexeme human, indicating that humanity remains semantically embedded within any of its possible reconfigurations. Whether the prefix post- suggests opposition, replacement, augmentation, or transcendence, the human persists as the linguistic and conceptual matrix of the posthuman. The posthuman cannot be detached from the species that engendered it: it expresses, rather, a collective process of self-surpassing. In Bostrom's allegory, the overcoming of death symbolizes not the quest for individual immortality but the communal aspiration of humankind to transcend its own finitude. The same applies to Bruce Sterling, Frédéric Beigbeder, and Julie Girard: the issue is always collective; it is the shared future that is at stake in the idea of posthumanity.

In line with this commentary, and drawing on the meaning assigned to the word in literary usage, one may conclude that the term *posthuman* generally refers to any species (or collective) that originates from, or remains closely connected to, the human substrate and wholly or partially transcends the human condition.

5. The Frankenstein Shortcut

In contemporary criticism and literary theory, a genealogical connection is often drawn between the figure of the posthuman and that of Victor Frankenstein's creature. The idea that the latter was created under an inspiration sharing certain affinities with transhumanist aspirations has become increasingly widespread.

Mary Shelley's major work, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, is an epistolary novel published in the first half of the nineteenth century (1818). It is only toward the end of that century that, as Corin Braga explains: "utopias change their narrative vehicle and begin to graft themselves, instead of extraordinary voyages, onto science-fiction adventures"[24]. From this perspective, Mary Shelley's novel stands as a forerunner of a new literary tendency.

It is also during this period that the figure of the "mad scientist" proliferates. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) by H. G. Wells, for instance, narrates the genetic manipulation of the human species. In Wells, the *monster* is disconnected from natural magic and becomes the outcome of a laboratory process. The novel's main character, Edward Prendick, is rescued by a ship after being shipwrecked and brought to a remote island where Dr. Moreau has taken refuge in order to carry out his unethical experiments without constraint. The doctor's island turns into an open-air laboratory populated by semi-human creatures produced through grafting and cloning performed by Moreau. Corin Braga observes about Dr. Moreau: "He

belongs to the typology of those brilliant and slightly mad scientists, in the lineage of Frankenstein and Dr. Jekyll"[25]. The nineteenth-century mad scientists share a common obsession of *playing God*, to fabricate a human being or come as close to it as possible. Indeed, Dr. Moreau "sets himself the demiurgic task of assisting nature, of raising the lower links of the great genealogical tree of living species toward the final stage, that of humankind"[26]. In Karel Čapek's play *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920), which introduced for the first time the word *robot*, derived from *rabótla* (work, labor), Rossum, a young scientist, seeks, like Frankenstein and Dr. Moreau, to recreate the human. Čapek's robots are originally organic creatures; it is only later that the same term would come to designate beings more often imagined as metallic. It is important to keep in mind that, in the spirit of these fictions staging the figure of the mad scientist, the human is regarded as the ultimate phase of evolution. The idea is not to conceive phylogenesis *from the human* but rather *up to the human*: "Starting from the idea that phylogenesis entails evolution toward the human condition, Dr. Moreau attempts to endow his creatures with reason, language, civilized behavior, and a code of rules of conduct"[27].

In H. G. Wells, in Karel Čapek, as well as in Mary Shelley, the experiments end in failure. Moreover, Corin Braga classifies these texts within the category of *anti-utopias*: failed utopias, at the extreme opposite of *outopias*, yet sharing with them the dimension of the *historical impossible*[28]. Victor Frankenstein's creature, like those of the mad scientists who descend from it, are failed humans. Yet many authors assert the existence of a line of filiation between Frankenstein's creature, transhumanist aspirations, and the figure of the posthuman. We will return here to three cases of authors and scholars who explicitly establish this genealogical link.

Mathieu Terence, in *Le transhumanisme est un intégrisme* (2012), undertakes a kind of value judgment, using a social-class metaphor to assess what he calls the "true origins" of transhumanisms:

> Of recent extraction, much like a commoner purchasing a particle of nobility, transhumanism delights in claiming the lofty lineage of Dante, who coined in his Divine Comedy the term Trasumanar, designating a spiritual transcendence of the limits of human nature. Further upstream, however, it would readily find numerous advantageous precedents. […] Closer to us, Collodi with Pinocchio, Shelley with Frankenstein, or Villiers de l'Isle-Adam with L'Ève future offer versions of this same question of the creation, from scratch, of a new form of life[29].

Mathieu Terence links *Frankenstein* to transhumanism by taking as a point of similarity the desire to create *from scratch* some form of life. Yet this desire, in this particular sense, never actually appears, at least not explicitly, in transhumanist texts. It seems rather to be the author's own interpretation. In the same move, he also associates transhumanism with a character whose presence is even more surprising in this context: Pinocchio. From a similar perspective, Mara Magda Maftei writes:

> Transhumanism, which moves "beyond humanism", seems at last to

allow the doubles – so fascinatingly portrayed by Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*), Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (*L'Ève future*), and Robert Louis Stevenson (*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) – to become reality[30].

Mara Magda Maftei evokes this genealogical link again in *Fictions posthumanistes*.

A specialist in the posthuman in literature, Elaine Desprès, in *Le posthumain descend-il du singe ?* (2020), devotes a section to the origins of posthumanism. The focus is no longer so much on the origins of transhumanist ideas as on those of the posthuman figure:

> Although the term posthumanism only emerged in philosophy in the late 1970s – and drew the interest of literary criticism only in the late 1990s and the 2000s – posthuman figures have abounded in fiction for much longer. In embryonic form, they already appear in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*[31].

Victor Frankenstein's creature would thus be, according to Elaine Desprès, an *embryonic form* of the posthuman[32]. Yet one question remains unresolved: what similarities bring Frankenstein's creature closer to the figure of the posthuman? According to the authors who sustain this filiation, the connection essentially comes down to two ideas: the manipulation of living matter and a demiurgic attitude. The first idea extends far beyond the boundaries of transhumanism, all the more so because the different strands of the movement address the subject only within the precise framework

of surpassing the human condition—never as a principle of imitating humans or for the *pleasure* of a mad scientist creating new life forms. The same observation applies to the second idea. It should nonetheless be noted that, within transhumanist discourse, the issue is less an opposition to the divine (even if that dimension exists) than a replacement of Mother Nature[33].

A motif, one must concede, brings Mary Shelley's work into closer proximity with transhumanist and posthuman discourses: the creature that escapes its creator. Extensively explored in *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (2014) by Nick Bostrom, this motif is indeed significant in posthuman thought. Conversely, several elements compel us to draw a much sharper distinction between Frankenstein's creature and the figure of the posthuman. It must be acknowledged that while, in *Frankenstein* and the other fictions mentioned, the human is conceived as the ultimate stage to be reached – surpassing it is not even a consideration; it lies outside the discussion – the posthuman, by contrast, is conceived from the perspective of moving beyond the human. Far from viewing the human being as an ultimate entity to be imitated or replicated, transhumanists see it as imperfect, weak, and defective, something that must be surpassed. The two perspectives are logically incompatible.

Moreover, the posthuman designates a species in a categorical sense. The concept does not refer to an isolated being or an exceptional individual. Frankenstein's creature is unique, solitary, exceptional: it is rejected by society and in no way constitutes a species. Its relation to the human species can in no sense be described as interspecific. Likewise, the posthuman is expected

to surpass the human through its capacity for action and/or its heightened degree of freedom, freedom of action, movement, and thought. Frankenstein's creature, on the contrary, is diminished in Mary Shelley's text. Its descriptions are degrading:

> How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips[34].

The description highlights the contrast between the scientist's intentions and the outcome of his experiment. This contrast emerges in the interplay of beautiful features, such as the black hair and white teeth, with the most repulsive aspects – the yellow skin, barely concealed arteries, watery eyes, straight black lips. This kind of double postulation underscores the premature nature of the new creation, which heightens the creator's sense of repulsion.

Victor Frankenstein's creature is horrible, monstrous, watery-eyed, shrivelled, wretched, miserable: a failed attempt to imitate the human. No resemblance can be drawn between this description and the idea evoked by the posthuman, which is meant to imply greater evolutionary maturity, superior intelligence (in opposition to the dull, watery look of the creature's eyes), or the dream of eternal youth (in opposition to shrivelled complexion).

6. Embryonic Forms of the Posthuman

In order to avoid merely developing what would amount, if that were the case, to a harsh critique following a tabula rasa logic, it is necessary to search for the existence of a more appropriate literary lineage – to identify works that share stronger similarities and more common ground with the transhumanist spirit and the figure of the posthuman – in order to offer a more constructive perspective. Without returning to the ancient fictions already widely revisited (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the figure of Daedalus, Dante's *trasumanar*) by several authors[35], we find the transhumanist leitmotifs of surpassing the human condition, of dreaming of the emergence of a superior species (the posthuman), of disembodiment, and of criticizing the *deficiencies* and *handicaps* of the human species in a significant number of literary works that have largely overlooked in studies on the origins of posthuman literature, even though they are, from this perspective, more fitting than *Frankenstein*. We will give four examples here.

In 1676, Gabriel de Foigny narrates, in *La Terre australe connue*, the encounter between the human (Nicolas Sadeur) and the Hermaphrodites. Believing that sexual impulses constitute the principal flaw of the human species, Gabriel de Foigny imagines a race (the Hermaphrodites) free of this handicap. This race is described as superior

to the human race. At the beginning of the fourth chapter, entitled "Description de la terre Australe, la Carte Géographique de la terre Australe", Nicolas Sadeur describes the way he is received: "My lodging and my food had been provided for me: with a care, diligence, and honesty surpassing the civility of the most refined Europeans"[36].

The Hermaphrodites are presented as wiser, more civilized, more reasonable. Nicolas Sadeur perceives them as superior beings. This superiority is largely due to the absence of *animal ardors*. Each hermaphrodite is capable of reproducing alone, without sexual commerce with another. The elimination of this *defect*, intrinsically associated with the human, generates, in Gabriel de Foigny's mind, a surpassing of our condition.

The physician and scientific writer Charles-François Tiphaigne de La Roche imagines, in *Giphantie* (1760), a *disembodied* species: a community of intelligent spirits endowed with instantaneous and total knowledge. During his first encounter with one of these spirits, the narrator describes it as follows:

> I perceived a kind of spot, a kind of shadow fixed in the air a few steps away from me. Like murky water deceiving the hope of the shepherdess who comes to consult it, it rendered only a confused image of her charms. I continued to gaze more intently, and I thought I discerned a human form and recognized a countenance so gentle and considerate that, far from frightening me, this encounter became for me a new cause for joy[37].

These spirits, like humans, manifest themselves through the faculty of speech.

The narrator is addressed as soon as he arrives on the island: "Stop, I was told, look straight ahead, and see the one who inspired you to undertake the perilous journey you have just made"[38]. An artifact in the shape of a globe allows these beings to learn and hear everything that happens on Earth, functioning like a kind of satellite listening device. A mirror grants them vision over all things. Yves Citton considers that Tiphaigne de La Roche "is one of those who can best help us think about the impact of technical objects on the development of our civilization"[39]. In *Giphantie*, Tiphaigne de La Roche "had the genius or the luck to foresee photography, pheromones, DNA, or geo-surveillance"[40].

These beings, who share several anthropomorphic traits, clearly transcend the human mind and the limits of the human condition. Corin Braga, who classifies this text in the category of *outopia*[41], discerns in Giphantie a dual utopian system: "Tiphaigne thus undoes the human, from a spiritualist standpoint, between its extremes, the beast and the angel. Babylon and Giphantia are constructed in opposition, positing a separation and an 'extreme reduction' of the animal and the genius"[42]. Beyond this particular text, Tiphaigne is highly critical of human nature, which he conceives as the source of the problem: the reason for the impossibility of the perfect city[43].

The third example we present is Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1890). This novel follows the pattern of the extraordinary voyage and, more particularly, the regressus ad uterum — the regenerative penetration into the womb of Mother Earth that is found in what are commonly called the *fictions souterraines* or the *littérature de la Terre creuse*. A scientific and technological

dimension is also woven in from the very first lines of the prologue:

> Having little knowledge of rhetorical art, and possessing but a limited imagination, it is only a strong sense of the duty I owe to Science and the progressive minds of the age, that induces me to come before the public in the character of an author. True, I have only a simple narration of facts to deal with, and am, therefore, not expected to present artistic effects, and poetical imagery, nor any of those flights of imagination that are the trial and test of genius[44].

Through these opening lines, Mary Bradley Lane establishes a realist convention with the reader. This is fairly common in the literature of her time, but what interests us more in her text is the valorization of science and of a progressive ideology, since our aim here is precisely to present works more appropriate for tracing a literary lineage of transhumanisms and posthuman literature.

Mizora is a feminist utopia — which can also be described as racist given the discourse directed against what is considered the *black race*; however, this qualification must be nuanced in view of the denigratory function of Vera Zarovitch, the novel's main character. Corin Braga classifies this novel among feminist outopias[45]. Vera Zarovitch, an aristocrat exiled from Serbia, is drawn into a maelstrom while in a region of the North Pole. In the bowels of the Earth she encounters the Mizorans, a people of women who tell Vera that the disappearance of men from Mizora dates back more than three thousand years.

These women are able to give birth without the involvement of the male sex. They reproduce by parthenogenesis. The Mizorans are of the *white race* (to use the author's expression), blonde and vegetarian. Their homogeneity is essentially due to eugenic and racist selection. This people is perceived by the narrator as superior to the humanity of the Earth's surface in more than one respect. Beyond the comparison of the two topographies undertaken by Vera – Mizora is judged richer and better organized than the surface world – the Mizorans are far more advanced in science and technology. They claim eternal youth and possess higher intellectual faculties:

> Their brain was of a finer intellectual fiber. It possessed a wider, grander, more majestic receptivity. They absorbed ideas that passed over me like a cloud. Their imaginations were etherealized. They reached into what appeared to be materialless space, and brought from it substances I had never heard of before, and by processes I could not comprehend. They divided matter into new elements and utilized them[46].

The Mizorans therefore surpass the human condition and embody at least two major transhumanist dreams: eternal youth and heightened intellectual performance. We can also establish a more precise lineage, in this case, between this feminist outopia and the transhumanism of Natahsa Vita-More[47] or the perspective of Donna Haraway. The figure of the posthuman is not foreign to feminism. Posthuman scholar and philosopher Francesca Ferrando has, moreover, proposed a

feminist genealogy of the posthuman in the arts, focusing mainly on visual works. She specifically addresses the idea of a radical re-elaboration of the self in the feminine world and of cyberfeminism[48].

The people of *Mizora* come even closer to the figure of the posthuman because the novel describes a phylogenetic evolution, as Corin Braga observes: "Western humanity belongs to a bygone past, whereas the Mizoranians belong to a phylogenetic future"[49]. *Mizora* is thus an instructive example of an embryonic form of transhumanist ideas and of posthuman literature.

As a final example, we briefly return to *Odd John* by the British writer and philosopher Olaf Stapledon (1935). The novel takes the form of a biography, recounting the life of John, the main character, from his birth to his death. John possesses superhuman abilities; he "develops faculties of intelligence and understanding that allow him to 'critically recapitulate' all the knowledge of Homo sapiens"[50]. Over the course of his development, he also learns to communicate telepathically, to read minds, and to dissociate his body from his mind. At first glance, one might think that the protagonist follows the conventional and exclusive pattern of the exceptional hero or the chosen one among ordinary mortals, which would fundamentally distance Odd John from a possible connection with posthuman literature. Yet what interests us here is precisely John's desire to constitute a new species; he "sets as his life's goal the establishment of a new line of evolution"[51]. His enterprise bears fruit, since the new species, superior to the human species, begins to proliferate and "the selection of the character's 'superior' anthropological traits is amplified by extrapolating these traits to an entire colony of mutants"[52]. Moreover, Olaf Stapledon's work carries a scathing critique of the human, one that recalls transhumanist positions: "Homo sapiens has little more to contribute to the music of this planet, nothing in fact but vain repetition. It is time for fimer instruments to take up the theme"[53]. In this respect, *Odd John* aligns in several ways with a diachronic and filiative perspective on the posthuman in literature.

In the four works we have presented, the human is perceived as deficient in relation to a species (or race) that is superior to it. Whether it is the hermaphrodites, the beings of *Giphantie*, the Mizorans, or John's mutants, this does not involve "a simple addition of a new faculty, nonexistent until the moment of its emergence, but rather a compensation for a deficiency or handicap, conceived as such through the comparison of the concrete human condition with ideal anthropological [or post-anthropological] models"[54]. Similarly to the anatomical condition of being wingless (*aptère*), the mortal, fleshly, and sexually differentiated nature of the human being represents anthropological (and ethnological) imperfections that these writers highlight, dismantle, compensate for, and redesign according to aesthetic preferences and ideological sensibilities. This corresponds, to a large extent, to the transhumanist ideal projected through the posthuman when it is approached through the prism of transhumanization.

7. Conclusion

Early on, writers and utopists developed fictions featuring diverse alternative evolutionary paths. The enhancement of humans and the total or partial removal of the

human condition are far from new motifs. It should be clarified here that this does not concern the actualization of the demiurgic dream of creating man. The idea of creating man and that of surpassing the human species have no genealogical relation. They have always coexisted and responded to different stakes and sensibilities. The posthuman thus owes more to *Mizora* than to *Frankenstein*. It is a fiction of surpassing which, however, today is marked, for the first time, with the scientific stamp. Human evolution is no longer imagined solely for comparative, critical, or pedagogical purposes. It is now envisaged. And the evolutionary paths depicted

are scientifically supported. The rejection of the human species acquires, among transhumanists, an imperative character, as soon as the technical possibilities for its replacement exist at the epistemological level. An updated reading of these texts, in light of the present technoscientific context, thus opens a new hermeneutic space. It is in this regard that the posthuman is singular. As humans increasingly diverge, in reality, from their conventional models, the posthuman appears more familiar and less science-fictional. Its motifs acquire, in literature, a new gravity and are now contingent upon stakes perceived as eminently contemporary.

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1. Lauren Kent, Anna Chernova, and Niamh Kennedy, "Xi and Putin Overheard Talking about Immortality and Organ Transplants", CNN, September 3, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/09/03/asia/xi-putin-chat-immortality-longevity-intl.

2. Google Trends data show a spike in the number of queries related to immortality and associated ideas at the beginning of September – Google, 2025. Immortality/Cyborg [Google Trends data]. Google Trends. Retrieved September 26, 2025, from https://trends.google.fr/trends/explore?date=today%201-m&q=Immortality,Cyborg&hl=fr.

3. Donna Haraway, *Manifeste Cyborg et autres essais. Sciences, fictions, féminismes, anthology*, edited by Laurence Allard, Delphine Gardey, and Nathalie Magnan, Paris, Exils Éditeur, 2007.

4. Cary Wolfe emphasizes the reference to Jean-François Lyotard: "My sense of posthumanism is thus analogous to Jean-François Lyotard's paradoxical rendering of the postmodern: it comes both before and after humanism (p. 15)" (Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

5. Jacques Ellul, *Le Système technicien*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1977, p. 128.

6. Gilbert Hottois, "L'inflation du langage et la dissociation du sens dans la philosophie contemporaine," in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1986, p. 61–69.

7. Term coined by Jacob von Uexküll (1864–1944). *Umwelt* refers to a "world of one's own": a specific sensory environment that determines the dimensions within which each species lives.

8. H. P. Lovecraft, *The Shadow Out of Time*, ePub edition, edited by S. T. Joshi and David E. Schiltz, 2006, (first published 1936), p. 35.

9. Mohamed-Sami Alloun, "Gnoséologie de la résistance dans le récit du posthumain", in *RELIEF – Revue électronique de littérature française*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2023, p. 52.

10. Lovecraft, *The Shadow Out of Time*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

11. *Ibidem*, p. 61.

12. Bruce Sterling, *Schismatrix Plus*, ePub edition, New York, Ace Books, 1996, p. 116.

13. *Ibidem*, p. 122.

14. *Ibidem*, p. 45.

15. *Ibidem*, p. 194.

16. *Ibidem*, p. 247.

17. *Ibidem*, p. 324.

18. Frédéric Beigbeder, *Une vie sans fin*, Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 2020 [2018], p. 65.

19. Julie Girard, *Le crépuscule des licornes*, Paris, Gallimard, 2023, p. 49.

20. *Ibidem*, p. 50.

21. *Ibidem*, p. 55.

22. *Ibidem*, p. 169.

23. Amaury Dehoux, *Le Roman du posthumain*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2020, p. 19.

24. Corin Braga, *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2018, p. 506.

25. *Ibidem*, p. 506.

26. *Ibidem*, p. 507.

27. *Ibidem*, p. 507.

28. *Ibidem*, p. 627-691.

29. Mathieu Terence, *Le transhumanisme est un intégrisme*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2012, p. 12.

30. Mara Magda Maftei, "Un transhumanisme stable et un posthumanisme multiple", in *Revue des sciences humaines*, no. 341, 2021, p. 7-16.

31. Elaine Desprès, *Le posthumain descend-il du singe ?*, Montréal, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2020, p. 45-58.

32. *Ibidem*, p. 20.

33. See Max More, "A Letter to Mother Nature", in Max More, Natasha Vita-More (eds.), *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*, Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013, p. 449-451, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118555927.ch41. Accessed August 15, 2025.

34. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, Planet PDF [eBook], 2006 [1818], p. 69.

35. See dissertation of Mehdi Achouche, *L'utopisme technologique dans la science-fiction hollywoodienne, 1982-2010 : transhumanisme, posthumanité et le rêve de « l'homme-machine »*, Université de Grenoble, 2011, p. 735.

36. Gabriel de Foigny, *La Terre australe connue : c'est-à-dire la description de ce pays inconnu jusqu'ici de ses mœurs et de ses coutumes*, Paris, Société des textes français modernes, 1990 [1676], p. 58.

37. Charles François Tiphaigne de la Roche, *Giphantie*, Paris, Points, 2022 (1760), p. 39.

38. *Ibidem*, p. 45

39. Yves Citton, Emilia Marra, "Merveille et altermodernité", in *La Deleuziana – Revue en ligne de philosophie*, no. 5, 2017, p. 168.

40. *Ibidem*, p. 168.

41. In Corin Braga's typology, an *outopia* is a type of utopia that is highly optimistic and unlikely. An *outopia* stands in opposition to an *antiutopia*.

42. Braga, *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, *op. cit.*, p. 252

43. *Ibidem*, p. 363-365

44. Mary E. Bradley Lane, *Mizora*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1999 (1890), p. 8.

45. Braga, *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

46. Bradley Lane, *Mizora*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

47. Natasha Vita-More is an American artist and philosopher, chair of the board of the international non-governmental transhumanist organization Humanity+, and the spouse of Max More, the leading figure of the extropianist branch of transhumanism.

48. Francesca Ferrando, "A feminist genealogy of posthuman aesthetics in the visual arts", *in Palgrave Communications*, no. 2, 2016, p. 122.

49. Braga, *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

50. *Ibidem*, p. 323.

51. *Ibidem*, p. 323.

52. *Ibidem*, p. 325.

53. Olaf Stapledon, *Odd John: A Story between Jest and Earnest*, New York, E. P. Dutton and Co., 1935, p. 160.

54. *Ibidem*, p. 249-250.