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Posthumanism in Italian Literature and Film Boundaries and Identity

Edited by
Enrica Maria Ferrara



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Enrica Maria Ferrara
Editor

Posthumanism in Italian Literature and Film

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Italian and Italian American Studies

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To my family

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book grew out of a double panel titled “Posthuman *impegno* in Italian literature and film” which I organized and co-chaired with Eugenio Bolongaro at the 2016 Themed Conference of the Society for Italian Studies in the UK and Ireland, held at Trinity College Dublin. I am very grateful to the conference organizers Daragh O’Connell, Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin and Corinna Salvadori Lonergan, who welcomed my initiative. Some of the papers delivered on that occasion are now included in this volume, which has been growing steadily and organically over the past three years as further contributors and topics were added to the original set of papers. My deepest appreciation goes to Stanislao Pugliese, Director of the Italian and Italian American Studies series, and Lina Aboujieb, Editorial Director at Palgrave Macmillan, for their wonderful support. I am particularly grateful to Joseph Francese and Grace Russo Bullaro for their encouragement and advice during the initial stages of the editorial project. I am also in debt to a number of friends and colleagues who helped me define my field of enquiry or otherwise gave me inspiration through scholarly conversations, discussions, e-mail exchanges and relaxed chats around dinner tables. Among them, in addition to my brilliant contributors, I would like to mention: Giancarlo Alfano, Marcello Barbato, the late Roberto Bertoni, Clodagh Brook, Chiara De Caprio, Emma Del Vecchio, Tiziana De Rogatis, Ursula Fanning, Kevin Foskin, Anne Fuchs, Stilian Milkova, John Sheil and Maria Tirelli. My heartfelt thanks go to my colleagues of the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics at University College Dublin, and Head of School Bettina Migge, who have provided a welcoming environment for my research. For her meticulous

work, I would like to acknowledge my professional indexer, Grainne Farren, who has provided a precious consultation tool for this volume. Her indispensable work has been funded through a research grant awarded to me by the UCD College of Arts and Humanities in the academic year 2019–2020. High praises should go to the editorial staff in Palgrave, particularly Rebecca Hinsley, and to the anonymous peer reviewers whose advice has been instrumental to enhance the appearance and content of this volume. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the distinguished scholars who have taken the time to read, review and endorse this book ahead of its publication: Pierpaolo Antonello, Michael Cronin, Serenella Iovino, Roberto Marchesini, and Charlotte Ross.

My interest in posthumanism was born out of my research on Italo Calvino, whose important role in the development of posthumanism in Italian literature I have acknowledged in my introduction. However, my passion for the topic peaked around the early 2010s, thanks to a number of films I watched, and passionately discussed, with my husband Paul Coffey. While none of those films (mostly non-Italian productions) are analysed in this book, the passion of our daily conversations—as well as our love for each other and for our children, Dylan, Nina and Seánpaolo—constitute a steady source of inspiration for me.

Praise for *Posthumanism in Italian Literature and Film*

“This very welcome book adds new voices and compelling critical perspectives to the burgeoning interest in philosophical posthumanism and the representation of the post-human within Italian Studies. A captivating assembly of analysis which justifies the editor’s claim that Italy is ‘the nest of post-humanist culture.’”

—Pierpaolo Antonello, *Faculty of Modern & Medieval Languages, University of Cambridge, UK*

“This volume of essays makes a powerful argument for the distinctiveness of the Italian contribution to contemporary debates on the posthuman. The contributors to *Posthumanism in Italian Literature and Film: Boundaries and Identity* show how the culture that gave the world modern European humanism has also produced some of the most radical and searching critiques of what it is to be human in the modern and late modern age.”

—Michael Cronin, Professor of French, author of *Eco-translation*, *Trinity College Dublin*

“Brilliantly edited by Enrica Maria Ferrara, *Posthumanism in Italian Literature and Film* expands the canon of posthumanist literary studies, enriching it with unexpected topics and voices. In a dazzling sequence of chapters on Leopardi, Pirandello, Elena Ferrante, Gianni Celati, Michelangelo Antonioni, and a number of contemporary storytellers and filmmakers, the authors of this fascinating book follow the human as it emerges from a tangle of organic and inorganic substances, DNA and energy sources, mobile phones and microbes, technology and politics. An engaging read, it is yet another testimony to the established presence of Italian culture on the scene of posthumanities.”

—Serenella Iovino, Professor of Italian Studies and Environmental Humanities, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

“Electing continuity and hybridization with alterities as the main cradle of existentiality, posthumanist thought may well be considered as a distinctive feature in the Italian culture of the last few decades. The re-evaluation of Giacomo Leopardi’s work, with the underlying legacy of Giordano Bruno’s panpsychism, inspires a new fascinating literature, more extrovert and emphatic than traditional intimist narratives, and in many ways more welcoming towards relationships and otherness. In

this context, the present volume has the merit to offer a punctual panoramic view of Italian literary posthumanism.”

—Roberto Marchesini, Philosopher and Ethologist, author of *Over the Human: Post-Humanism and the Concept of Animal Epiphany*

“This wide-ranging volume seeks to expand our knowledge and understanding of the varied and intriguing ways in which Italian literature and film have engaged with the complex relationships between humans, technology, animals and non-human phenomena. The essays, which are located productively in relation to existing scholarly debates, draw effectively on recent and more classic theoretical reflections to explore a range of issues relating to posthuman embodiment, social alienation, and existential and ethical concerns. They offer original and compelling contributions to scholarship that enrich and expand ongoing debates about this increasingly crucial topic.”

—Charlotte Ross, *Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Birmingham, UK*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: How Italians Became Posthuman

Enrica Maria Ferrara

In 1945, one of the most influential intellectuals in twentieth-century Italian culture, Elio Vittorini, published a novel entitled *Men and not Men* [*Uomini e no*] which was an account of the partisan struggle in the city of Milan occupied by the German troops before its liberation by the Allies in June 1945. The protagonist of the novel is an intellectual named Enne 2 whose philosophical reflections on the nature of humans and nonhuman others, good and evil, love and betrayal, singular and collective identity, and other antinomic couples, are central to the development of the story. Vittorini explores key themes which had already been introduced in his cult novel *Conversation in Sicily* [*Conversazione in Sicilia*] (1938–1939); this time, however, he seems to be particularly troubled by what he regards as the fluid boundaries between human and animal behaviour. This is why, along with Enne 2, his partisan accolades and his beloved partner Berta, three dogs feature among the main characters of the novel. These are Greta, Gudrun and Kaptän Blut who are trained by their German

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commander to attack and kill human prisoners. In particular, when the dog Greta becomes one of the casualties during a fight between partisans and German military forces, the man responsible for killing the dog is fed to the other two, Gudrun and Kaptän Blut. Notwithstanding the horrific cruelty of the whole scene, Vittorini goes to great lengths to underline the humanity of the dogs who are even described, in a brief and slightly surreal passage, as speaking to one another. It is a very short exchange, consistent with the experimental nature of the novel and one of its main, albeit possibly not very effective, innovative features (Bonsaver 2000, 111). However, what this expedient of the speaking dogs achieves is to emphasize, even if just on a subliminal level, the dissolving margins between human and nonhuman animals. If language has always been considered a distinctive feature of the humans and a cornerstone of “human exceptionalism” in its “fetishization of difference” (Cronin 2017, 68), Vittorini feels that it is important to highlight this aspect for the purpose of what he is ultimately trying to demonstrate: namely that “otherness,” the nonhuman, is consubstantial with human beings. In a crucial passage, after the dog Kaptän Blut has killed and eaten the prisoner, the narrator wonders whether the killing instinct is shared by humans and nonhumans alike, a feature which could be considered intrinsic to animality and therefore part of the human essence.

While there is definitely an attempt to define the nature of human beings from an essentialist perspective—through a relentless dialogue with an implied reader to whom the narrator’s italicized commentaries are addressed—Vittorini distributes this essence equally between human and nonhuman animals and seems to reject the idea of a definitive difference between the two species. What he is ultimately concerned with is that “we, men, can also be ‘not men’ ... there are, in each man, many inhuman possibilities,” but he does not aim to “divide humanity in two blocks: one of which is all human while the other is inhuman” (Vittorini 1977, 124).¹ This approach seems to confirm the hypothesis, advanced by Amberson and Past and based on Esposito’s argument, that “Italian thought stands as a tradition that, unlike much of Western philosophy from Descartes to Heidegger, does not seek to suppress the biological or ‘animal’ part of man in its construction of human identity” (4).

Problematic as it may be, Vittorini’s representation is groundbreaking in its provocative dissection of what constitutes human and nonhuman behaviour, pushing the boundaries further ahead compared to the conclusion he had reached in his previous novel. In *Conversation in Sicily* he had

advanced the hypothesis that grief and vulnerability (“the woes of the outraged world”) as well as the humans’ ability to transcend and perform these emotions through language are key aspects of humanity; in *Men and not Men*, less than ten years later, a first-hand experience of war and destruction led him to extend this concept of vulnerability, and the articulation of language as an expressive medium, to other nonhuman species. However, his question as to whether the ability to kill and hate, to be a Fascist and a National Socialist, a perpetrator, an assassin, is partly or exclusively a prerogative of the human remained open as he intended it to be: “We have Hitler today. What is he? Is he not a man? We have those Germans of his. We have the fascists. And what is all this? Can we say that this is not, even this, inside the man? Does this not belong to the man? ... We have Gudrun, the bitch. What is this bitch? We have the dog Kaptän Blut. ... What are they? Are they not a part of man? Don’t they belong to the man?” (Vittorini 2005, 876–877).²

In the context of the present book exploring the theme of posthumanism in Italian literature and film, Vittorini’s novel is exemplary for a few different reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates that the need to reconsider the place of the human vis-à-vis the nonhuman other, not only in terms of ontological and epistemological hierarchies but also, more specifically, from an ethical perspective, was accelerated by the devastating encounter with the merciless face of humanity during World War I and, even more so, World War II. I am not suggesting that posthumanism originated at this time; indeed, one of the theses of this volume—in agreement with recent scholarly work on this topic³—is that the second half of the nineteenth-century and the first two decades of the twentieth-century, the period widely known as modernism, was the time in which the premises for a decentring of the *anthropos* were laid out. However, the two world conflicts, which were unprecedented for their scale and deployment of technologically advanced weapons and machinery, provided the concrete opportunity during which, as illustrated by Vittorini, humans could come face to face with the human and nonhuman other (environment, animals and technological artefacts) in traumatic circumstances which forced them to re-think their identity.

Secondly, I find *Men and not Men* particularly interesting as an early contribution to a theory of the posthuman subject in Italian literature because the identity of the intellectual Enne 2 is negotiated through a performative dialogue between the narrator and the character which is confined to a particular *locus* of the text, the so-called *corsivi* [sections in

italics]. This means that, on the one hand, identity is staged as relational, that is dependent on dialogue and on the account of oneself (Enne 2) given by another (the narrator) (Cavarero 2000). Thus, the “we” of the dialogic subject becomes a precondition for the birth of the “I.” As Judith Butler sums it up: “I cannot muster the ‘we’ except by finding the way in which I am tied to ‘you,’ ... You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know” (Butler 2004, 49). Such identity-building practice has a crucial role in literature at times of massive social changes, when storytelling is used for the creation of new social interactions that emerge from the debris of old communities. One classic example in Italian literature is offered by Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* in which the ten young men and women escaping the Black Death of 1348 resort to interactive storytelling not only as a cathartic medium—to kill time and defy the threat of catastrophe—but also, and more importantly, as a powerful performative tool which enables them to rescue aspects of the society they left behind and build a new identity for themselves and their community. Here, like in other texts that emerge in times of natural and man-made disasters, language captures—through dialogic interaction—the very nature of human identity, its *relational* element. This in turn underlines the interdependency and vulnerability of the humans, exposed to the “gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence” in our precarious lives (Butler 2004, 26).

On the other hand, in Vittorini’s novel, as the character Enne 2 inhabits the metanarrative dimension of the text and comes to life in the *corsivi* written by the autodiegetic narrator, we witness the entanglement of writing with a “theory of the human subject” (Alfano 2016, 45), which in Italian literature can be traced all the way back to Petrarch. In Petrarch, subject identity becomes the object of an extensive reflection that has the expression of self-in-time through writing as its privileged focus. From Petrarch through to Montaigne and all the way to Descartes, written language articulates a discourse on the human subject which brings into focus how the uniqueness of each individual existence is inextricably linked to the fluctuation of inner feelings and thoughts as developed over the course of a lifetime through the powerful expressive and “stylized” medium of language (Alfano 2016, 35–100).

Let us then pause for a moment to ask a couple of research questions which inform some of the chapters included in this volume, allowing us to

capitalize on the discussion conducted so far on the basis of Vittorini's introductory example.

If human language, especially in its written form, grants us a privileged access point to understand and perform identity, from Petrarch to Vittorini and beyond, is it possible to channel through it the voice of nonhuman others? If so, how can this be achieved without the paradoxical representation of dogs parroting human language? Assuming that identity is indeed relational and therefore shaped and performed in dialogue with other humans but also with nonhuman animals and other entities, is it morally and ethically sustainable to continue expressing such identity through the linguistic medium? Is it not true, instead, to paraphrase a famous provocative statement by Karen Barad (2003, 2007) that language has been granted too much power?

* * *

Cogito ergo sum: the very root of the Cartesian humanistic conceit of human primacy that has shaped Western consciousness has also been the crux around which the concept of human identity has been revolving and expressing itself as power discourse in the humanist era. The Cartesian cogito posits the centrality and the omnipotence of the human, his or her ability to rule the irrational and chaotic ontology of passive matter, and give it a shape and a voice through linguistic articulation. Thus the Cartesian cogito validates man's⁴ centrality and his superiority over other beings in light of his ability to reflect upon the self and express identity through language.

If we think about the influence that Descartes's philosophy had on the rise of the English novel, a genre that placed the representation of the modern individual at its core, we will be able to grasp the enormous impact that the presumed dichotomy between the individual and its consciousness must have had on how humans thought of themselves and described their own identity over the next subsequent centuries. Indeed, the process of self-examination that splits the self into a written subject—whose interiority becomes the object of the tale—and a writing subject (the conscious cogito) is central in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) as well as in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767). Giving a written account of one's thoughts, emotions and reflections—as they develop over the course of a given time span—is a founding moment in the definition of the modern

individual as “the identity of a *self* is based in the *consciousness* of being the same thinking subject as someone in the past, i.e. in the memory of his successive conscious states” (Descombes 2016, 84). Additionally, the act of writing about the self succeeds in joining together the “two rival philosophies of subjectivity”: that which defines the subject based on “*mental interiority*”—with its solipsistic attitude—and the other which, instead, focuses on “*personal expressivity*” (Descombes 2016, 72–73), accessible to others and therefore objective.

In Italian literature, which is the primary field of investigation chosen by the editor of this book—albeit from an interdisciplinary and comparative perspective—the rise of the novel will not happen until about a century after the publication of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Indeed, the first edition of Alessandro Manzoni’s *The Betrothed* [*I promessi sposi*] was published in 1827.⁵ Thus, it may be appropriate to say that the privileged means of expression selected by Italian artists and intellectuals to represent human identity after Descartes’ revolutionary theorization about the self were still the theatre—which emphasized the relational aspect of identity through dialogue—and poetry. It is not surprising then if the first shakes and blows to the Cartesian method underpinning the image of a human self separated from language and consciousness, a body separated from its mind, and therefore a human separated from other living forms and inanimate beings by virtue of his or her reflective and linguistic abilities, emerged in Italian literature from the world of poetry—with Leopardi in the nineteenth-century—and from the world of theatre, with Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) at the turn of the twentieth-century. Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837), who, on the one hand, can be seen as the classic Romantic poet filtering landscape aesthetics through his interiority and giving voice to the exceptional identity of the artist and his sensitivity, on the other hand, was a ground-breaking thinker who challenged the idea of a neat separation between human and nonhuman forms, and believed in the ontological continuity and porosity of matter/nature and culture/language as illustrated in his monumental diary *Zibaldone*. As noted by Gianna Conrad in her chapter on Leopardi which opens the first part of the present volume, Leopardi’s humanity is “no longer closed in upon itself but open and in ontological continuity with animals and nature. This concept, while reducing all species to the same degree of vulnerability, simultaneously focuses on the ‘continuum between nature and culture,’ pointing to a form of egalitarianism of species which is both contiguous and reciprocal in nature.” It is remarkable that Leopardi’s journal, written

between 1817 and 1832, persuasively described by Conrad as anticipating posthuman concerns, predates by a few decades Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, first published in 1859 and unanimously seen as the work that undermined the following cornerstones of anthropocentrism: "(1) disjunctive essentialism ... (2) the idea of *scala naturae* or hierarchy of living beings ... (3) the oppositional dialectics of nature and culture, and especially the dualistic ontology" (Marchesini 2016, 54).⁶ As humans feel threatened by having to share the same genealogical line with other species, they also perceive that central concepts of humanism such as freedom, self-determination, autopoiesis, interiority, may be eroded by proximity with other beings whose behaviour, until then, has been considered mechanically determined. As a result, the immediate human reaction is "to objectify the non-human ... and let man emerge as protagonist" (Marchesini 2016, 56). This entails "to reduce the animal content of human beings and confine them nearly exclusively to a cultural dimension"; to underplay the extent of such proximity by depicting the animal as radical alterity; and, finally, "to re-launch the model of animal as machine": an entity "so immersed in the world that can no longer contemplate the world" (2016, 56–57).

As we enter the modernist arena, we can witness a destabilizing and de-centring of the humans as well as their attempt to hold on to their place in the "here and now" of a cultural–natural sphere dominated by a hyper-virilized version of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. I am referring to the Futurist movement by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944) which simultaneously incarnates what have been termed as the "two modes of the modernist posthuman formulated as a series of linked antitheses: heroic versus anti-heroic, egotistic versus post-anthropocentric, conflictual versus peaceful, loud versus quiet" (Wallace 2016, 43). It is as if only in the tension of the binary, which has however lost its ontological value, can the individual be re-born and regain their place in nature by eradicating the "I" as it used to be, with aggression and determination. Despite their loss of a privileged place in the hierarchy of species, the new Futurist humans will still dominate nature and the environment; they will do so by severing their ties with the old humanist humans and their academic culture whose museums, "absurd slaughterhouses for painters and sculptors," are compared to graveyards (Marinetti 2009b, 52).⁷ Aside from the bombastic and propagandistic tone of Marinetti's manifestos, a posthumanist programme is certainly visible in his commitment to modify the human language so that it can express its interaction with matter and

technology without the filter of human feelings.⁸ What the leader of Futurism aims to achieve is to “substitute for human psychology ... the lyrical obsession with matter” (Marinetti 2009d, 122).⁹ As if in anticipation of Barad’s disempowerment of language as a human-centred, egotistic and subjective tool, Marinetti launches his poetry of “word-in-freedom” which bans the use of adjectives, adverbs, tenses other than the infinitive, punctuation. And yet, despite this destructive force—or possibly because of it—the individual reinvents itself and “let man emerge as protagonist” (Marchesini 2016, 56). We have to wait for Pirandello to develop, also in modernist times, a critique of anthropocentrism. His theory of humour in literature and his adoption of a digressive and “intransitive” style (Mazzacurati 1987) of writing served to question the centrality and stability of the human already in his narrative work, which pre-dates his major plays. In fact, Pirandello’s concern with the nonhuman other, which can be gleaned through his narrative, is a feature that permits to align his work with that of other Italian modernists such as Tozzi, Svevo, Gadda and Palazzeschi, and European artists such as Joyce, Woolf and Eliot. Godioli, Jansen and Van den Bergh make this central argument in their chapter that “by questioning the anthropocentrism underlying novelistic clichés and conventions ... Pirandello reframes human events within a much broader biological continuum, where the hierarchical relation between human calamities and the ‘lives of worms’ cannot be taken for granted anymore.” Thus the human species is contemplated from a cosmic distance, by way of a methodology termed as “long-range aesthetics” that leads to a relativization of its centrality. It is in Pirandello’s theatre, however, that the so-called “epic I” (Szondi 1987, 6)—the solid and unitary self of the traditional storytelling human, and the omniscient author of the nineteenth century (and eighteenth century) novelistic tradition—comes explicitly under attack. The author sought by the *Six Characters in Search of an Author* [Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore] (1921) disintegrates under the siege of his own ghosts, figments of his imagination produced by the power of language. The human “other,” with whom the traditional theatre interfaced the human in a constant dialogue, has become a linguistic “other.” The characters are fictional and therefore reveal the linguistic (i.e. fictional) nature of all aspects of reality, including and especially that of the human.

These modernist premises of posthumanism, discussed in the first part of this book, are an important threshold from which it is possible to contemplate the process of becoming posthuman at its inception whereas, on

the one hand, Leopardi's philosophy paves the way to a bio-egalitarian understanding of species, involving creation of hybrid human–nonhuman identities; on the other hand, Pirandello's critique brings to the forefront the struggle between nature and culture, ontology and language, taking us back to those central questions which we have previously formulated. If human language is the main tool for the (literary) representation of human identity, what happens when the meaning of that identity is altered by interaction with other agents that become central in the posthuman era, including nonhuman animals, inert matter and technological artefacts? Is it true, as recently argued, that literature is inherently posthuman, as “it gives access to the essence of things, the stoniness of stones, because it bypasses conceptual thought and operates directly on and via sensation?” (Askin 2016, 172). Conversely, can it not be argued that the realms of posthumanism and literature “might be mutually exclusive” if we consider the literary as a “cultures of the letter as distinct from increasingly dominant cultures of code and the digital?” (Callus and Aquilina 2016, 122).

* * *

One of the first Italian intellectuals to address these or similar questions in his non-fictional and fictional work was Italo Calvino who began to theorize about the combinatory nature of literature in the mid to late 1950s. Calvino's understanding of the repetitive and formulaic nature of storytelling during his classification, transcription and re-writing of the Italian fairy tales for the publisher Einaudi (1954–1956), and his concurrent exposure to structural and post-structural linguistics (particularly the work of Lévi-Strauss and Barthes), led him to reflect upon literature as repetitive “becoming”: a device powered by functions, structures and linguistic units that might not even need a human to operate. In 1966, when he first delivered the talk titled *Cybernetics and Ghosts* ([Cibernetica e fantasmi] published one year later, in 1967) Calvino seems to anticipate (or comment upon) some of the main concepts which underpin the critical re-examination of humanism by thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. As he humorously proclaims the imminent death of the human author whose storytelling performance will soon be carried out by computer devices, Calvino simultaneously explores the idea of the performative nature of language and reality, and of reality as a linguistic construct. Having reached the conclusion that literature is a combinatory machine which could be run by

artificial intelligence, Calvino proceeds to wonder about the role of the human in the new epistemic process. His conclusion is that repetition of linguistic formulas and narrative functions is vital in literature to disclose what he calls “a language vacuum” (Calvino 1987, 19), an untold area of reality which is unexplored because we have no words to define it yet. Calvino describes this process as a tension or aspiration displayed by the human to thread the margins between what is real and what is not, between conscious and subconscious, natural and supernatural, human and nonhuman. We may argue that it is precisely in this “language vacuum” hypothesized by Calvino that the new posthuman human is born in Italian literature.¹⁰ In fact, over the 1960s and 1970s, Calvino will attempt to narrow the gap between human and nonhuman by widening the language and filling that “vacuum” through the *Cosmicomiche* stories [Le cosmicomiche] (1965) of the humanized mollusc Qfwfq, or the stones and paths of that hybrid culture–nature formation that are his cities in *The Invisible Cities* [Le città invisibili] (1972). By exploring the boundaries of language and its ability to re-negotiate the borders between the humans and various other forms of life, either through creation of hybrid figurations or through stylistic experiments of repetition (*The Invisible Cities* and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* [Il castello dei destini incrociati, 1973]) aiming to make identity surface through a sort of epiphany of “differentials” (Deleuze 2014), Calvino opens the way to a different form of intellectual engagement. Though, Calvino was not alone in his quest.

After the failed experiment of the Gramscian “organic intellectuals” who were expected to bridge the gap between privileged middle-class with underprivileged working-class humans during the enthusiastic period of post-war reconstruction dominated by left-wing cultural politics, many Italian (and European) intellectuals lost faith in organized Communism in the late 1950s and were made to confront the painful realization of the discursive self-regenerating nature of political power. Based on these views, art was one of the instruments that political power had been using to re-create itself under different guises and shapes throughout the centuries: neorealism, which was the cultural reification of the work undertaken by organic intellectuals, was just one example of the multifaceted incarnation of power discourse.

Pier Paolo Pasolini vehemently denounces this state of affair between the 1960s and the 1970s, through films such as *The Hawks and the Sparrows* [Uccellacci e uccellini] (1966)—whose protagonist is famously a talking raven, zoomorphic representation of the author as engaged

intellectual—and even more so through his largely neglected plays. For example, the play *Calderón* (drafted in 1966 and published in 1973) is partly set within Velazquez’s painting *Las Meninas*, the artwork which, in Foucault’s view, serves to visualize the de-centring of the human subject by unveiling the dualistic logics ruling representational realism: “We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter, and made visible to his eyes by the same light that enables us to see him. And just as we are about to apprehend ourselves, transcribed by his hand as though in a mirror, we find that we can in fact apprehend nothing of that mirror but its lustreless back. The other side of a psyche” (Foucault 1994, 6).

Impegno then becomes, in Pasolini’s mission, a call to unmask and challenge the inherent dualism that rules Western thought, and its representation in literature and film, by pursuing a crusade against capitalism and its commodification of the body. Capitalism, as argued by Pasolini, is a self-regenerating power discourse, one which has taken several shapes and forms in the history of humanity, a manifestation of “rational” thought able to turn against its own human (and animal) body by victimizing individuals perceived as “others” based on their race, gender, species and social status. However, with Pasolini we are largely still in a phase of antithesis during which intellectuals were grappling with the traditional meaning of human identity from an oppositional perspective.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the anti-humanist posture adopted by anti-hegemonic groups such as the Feminist and Queer movements, the Anti-racial and Post-colonial movements, the Environmentalist and Animal Rights movements, contributed to undermining the traditional human subject—Da Vinci’s Vitruvian man, symbol of Western humanism—through a systematic rejection of its dominant place in society and its normativity. This also entailed a rejection of the dialectical scheme of thought which perpetuates the dichotomy between Same and Other. Based on this scheme, of Marxist descent, identity (and knowledge) would be generated through the opposition of otherness (antithesis) to sameness (thesis) and this would cause entire categories of beings to fall into the broad negative categories of the “sexualized others (woman), the racialized other (native) and the naturalized other (animals, the environment, the earth)” (Braidotti 2013, 27). For these beings, identity would be a mark of difference; their subjectivity would exist and acquire a meaning only in opposition to the dominant subject (male, heterosexual, white). As Plumwood has recently illustrated, the iteration of a rationalist culture grounded on human/nature dualism is definitely the big culprit in Western

society as it links supremacy of reason to the human via an “identification of humanity with active mind ... and non-humans with passive, tradeable bodies” (2002, 4). The effect of such “otherization of nature” are fully apparent in our contemporary “ecological crisis” which is “the crisis of a cultural ‘mind’ that cannot acknowledge and adapt itself properly to its material ‘body’” (2002, 15).

And it is precisely through the announcement of a “crisis of reason” that Italian philosophers gave a decisive impulse to the struggle against oppositional binarism with the publication of the anthology *Crisi della ragione* [Crisis of Reason] by Aldo Gargani in 1979. As illustrated by Peter Carravetta, this volume,

which contained “position papers” by the most distinguished thinkers at the time, clearly demonstrates that reason, and its methodological certainties, are no longer trustworthy. This sets the premises for breaking the dominant methodology-driven paradigm, which had gained favour for nearly two decades. Thinkers show that the claims of reason and the procedures of various disciplines (anthropology, linguistics, epistemology, political science) are metaphysically and rhetorically flawed, and must be questioned anew. (2015, 125)

Over the next subsequent decades, representatives of the posthuman turn, at least from the 1980s onwards, have proposed a number of philosophical solutions reflective of this blurring of the boundaries between human and nonhuman which reshapes the ever-widening category of that which is perceived to be human.

The inevitable reference is first and foremost to Gianni Vattimo’s (1936–) “weak thought,” grounded on Heidegger’s existentialism (that first undermined Cartesian dualism through a notion of the human being as “Dasein” or “becoming”) and on Nietzsche’s nihilism; Vattimo’s anthology *Il pensiero debole* [Weak Thought] published in 1983, “brings to the foreground the limits and dilemmas of ontology and of Western metaphysical thinking in general” while, at the same time, “is devoted to rethinking and reshaping the question of mankind’s essential being” (Carravetta 1988, 22). Despite their nihilistic approach, the philosophers of “weak thought” attempt to salvage the human subject (notwithstanding its “weakness”) by representing its experience of suspension over a threshold beyond which there might be nothingness, or else just an

“imperceptible becoming, establishing contact with itself [the subject] as it dissolves” (Rovatti 2012, 71).

And it is precisely this notion of “suspension” that allows us to bring together the philosophy of Vattimo and Giorgio Agamben (1942–), both reflecting upon the concept of “renunciation,” inherited from Heidegger, as an affirmative rather than destructive principle. In Agamben’s biopolitics, “suspension and destruction do not mean unlearning ... and forgetting how to be human” (Bartoloni 2009). Conversely, “moments of suspension are precisely the moments when humans and animals become suspended in indistinction, and when animality and humanity are momentarily reconciled ... on the threshold that the anthropological machine ... comes to a halt” (Bartoloni 2009).

Other important alternatives to male-centric, heteronormative, logocentric humanism emerged within the area of feminist thought with Luisa Muraro’s (1940–) “feminist thought of difference,” stemming from Luce Irigaray’s philosophy, and her invention of the new symbolic order of the mother. As illustrated by Ferrando, during the second wave of Feminism, “the theoretical contribution of Feminism to Posthumanism is crucial. The fact that Feminism brought into question male symbolism as universal has been fundamental to the posthuman effort of decentring the human and its anthropocentric logos from the centre of the discourse” (2016, 5). In other words, the crisis of reason stemming from the death of Man brought along the deconstruction of Woman (Braidotti 2013, 28–30) and her impulse “to destabilize this unitary vision of the subject and open up instead to internal alterity” (Braidotti 2015, V),¹¹ as observed by Kristeva (1991). The critique of humanism—centred around the traditional notion of human as man, which we have discussed—would lead to a progressive erosion of the boundaries with the technological, animal and environmental other: “Thus if the decline of humanism ushers in posthumanism by encouraging sexualized and racialized humans to emancipate themselves from the master-slave dialectic, the crisis of anthropos paves the way to a sudden irruption of the evil force of the naturalized others. Animal, insects, plants and the environment—even the planet and cosmos as a whole—now come into play” (Braidotti 2015, XV).¹² One of the first constructive proposals to negotiate the transition to a post-anthropocentric posthumanism comes precisely from the feminist arena with Donna Haraway’s powerful theory that provocatively posits the image of the cyborg as an ontological and epistemological tool to explore new alterities, capable of “building and destroying machines, identities,