

Human and Posthuman in Tales of Extinction

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Abstract:

Via Braidotti, Ranci re and others, the article notes Australia's massive loss of species and examines fiction that points to this problem, seeking ways by which to engage feelings and change attitudes. In a predominantly humanist tradition, novels and stories move from cute animals dressed as humans to more anguished engagements with bird extinctions. All varyingly push people from complacency to envisaging their own extinction, from melancholia to activism, pointing to a posthuman unlearning in which we are no longer exceptional agents, but one more set of actants in and of nature. Following posthuman theorists like Barad and Braidotti, the article surveys Australia's record of species extinctions and assesses novels by Ethel Pedley, Dal Stivens, Josephine Wilson and Richard Flanagan for their handling of ecological crisis.

Keywords: Australia, Fiction, Species, Extinction, Actants, Agents, Posthuman

The fundamental drivers of the 'posthuman turn' in all its forms are environmental catastrophes such as the effects of climate change and how they challenge us to examine our own contributions to these. This entails a critique of our conceptual/ cultural/ species-centric biases that have allowed destructive behaviours to seem to be normal operations of a central subject (human) upon a separate, passive and diffuse object (nature).

Some key issues in a posthuman dismantling operation are:

- How to learn to relate to what is not of immediate use to us or in understandable relation with us.
- How to unlearn ourselves: not as central, separate, exceptional or superior, but simply as one more element in 'nature.'
- How to function in relation to systems at scales of size and complexity beyond our capacity to comprehend.
- How to grieve or hope in ways that are productive rather than debilitating or delusory.

The general turn to what is termed the environmental humanities leads me to consider some attempts in fiction to move the canons of social practice that have given Australia a world-leading record in species extinction — and yes, the sporting culture of the nation often seems to infuse announcements of this fact as a proud achievement (Morton 2021). By mixing feeling, entertainment and ethics, many stories seek to express concern about human damage to the environment and to varying extents, push us into thinking in posthuman spaces. In reading across a sample of fiction, I am informed by theorists of the posthuman, such as Claire Colebrook, Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti, as well as by the work of Australians, such as Val Plumwood and Deborah Bird-Rose.

How has Australia arrived at its scandalous record of killing off entire groups of plants and animals? There are several reasons: primarily massive land clearing, floods, and fires destroying habitat, linked with the introduction of species gone feral: predators like cats, competitors like the European carp, or wreckers of biota like rabbits, goats and wild pigs. However, behind that is the lack of care on the part of settler humans, and that is cultural: most of the extinctions are small creatures and many of them are nocturnal. They are, therefore, out of sight to day-dwellers and do not reach a threshold of loveability until they reach a certain size and look cuddly — like the koala. Many of them look like rats, so if seen are mentally catalogued as potential pests. The ones that do reach a decent size are often hunters — dingoes, Tasmanian Tigers, Tasmanian Devils, eagles — and for farmers, these constitute a threat to stock that warrants their extermination. Then we arrive at the other end of the scale, where huge numbers just become an abstract blur in the human mind and have no hold on our feelings or our sense of viable corrective action. We need to humanise atoms and animals to be able to feel for/with them, but we also need to avoid anthropomorphising all things. The problem is presented in theoretical terms by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2012) in his delineation of the human-centred limitations of postcolonial analysis, and it is dramatised by Italo Calvino in his short story of the life of molecules at the dawn of creation in his collection *Cosmicomiche* (1965).

In this context, we can see how the arts have played a real role, if one of limited public effect, in changing human attitudes and behaviours. Statistics are wound back to specific cases that we can see and feel for. Though Eurocentric, configuring the koala as a ‘native bear’ reduced its strangeness for white settlers. Books like Dorothy Wall’s *Blinky Bill* inserted it into the literary pantheon of humanised creatures and have enabled it to become a national icon in which its unique biological differences feature and it has become the focus of political action to preserve forest habitat. One of the most popular modern books for children has done the same for another of Australia’s unique creatures. Jackie French and Bruce Whatley’s *Diary of a Wombat* puts an animal into a relationship with humans, according to its agency and acknowledging the tension between treating something as a lovable pet while recognising its wild otherness. This book has probably done more for the protection of the wombat than any scientific research. The promotion of national culture has also led to a blend of anti-imperialist and wildlife protection activism that substitutes chocolate images of the threatened bilby for the Easter bunny.

At the same time, these non-human animal images are presented either in anthropomorphised forms or worked into items that can be commodified as entertaining and attractive to humans. The posthuman challenges us to see other life forms as having their own autonomy and worth independent of our projections onto them of feeling, even of caring concern.ⁱ

Ethel Pedley, way back in 1899, produced a children’s fantasy story, *Dot and the Kangaroo*. She prefaces it with a dedication:

To the children of Australia in the hope of enlisting their sympathies for the many beautiful, amiable, and frolicsome creatures of their fair land, whose extinction, through ruthless destruction, is being surely accomplished.

Species loss is, then, a long-established concern in Australian literature as well as a real-world contemporary scandal. Pedley’s environmentalist ideal remains a challenge even more compelling in

this Anthropocene age of global warming and its impact on the ecosystems of our island continent, but its century-old warning suggests the failure of the arts to engage public sentiment or to convert sentiment into social action.

Pedley's kangaroo points to the human species as a fundamental problem overriding postcolonial difference (for the animal, Aborigines and Whites are the same: they both kill wildlife), but the book signals the particular intensity of settler depredations and the need to reshape attitudes to creatures seen by Europeans as both natural (and thus inferior and expendable unless useful) and unnatural (monotremes and marsupials flouting scientific tradition), being thereby an offense to God's creation as defined by the Northern hemisphere. *Dot and the Kangaroo* does not escape from its human-centred moralising and appeal to individual charity, but it makes Australian fauna both visible and appealing to European intruders. Without Pedley's story, reinforced by later work from May Gibbs, Dorothy Wall, Ruth Park, and others, the current awareness of wildlife conservation would not exist, so some case for the efficacy of literature and the political importance of cultural revision can be made. At the same time, it shows up the shortcomings of literary faith in appealing to human sentiment as well as the need to cultivate empathy for wildlife that is not childlike and dressed up in human costume. There is also the need to add posthuman critiques of systems of economics and land use; imaginings that go beyond human interests, attending to ecosystems as the complex enmeshment of all species.

In Australian literature, one would have to say that, from popular writers like Liane Moriarty to more literary ones like Tim Winton, the general emphasis remains resolutely human-centred, if not also humanist: tales of families breaking and bonding across generations, ethnic differences, journeys of self-discovery, and so on. One of the 'lost' great works of Australian literature, in my opinion, is the novel *A Horse of Air* by Dal Stivens. While it retains human characters as central to its drama, it also connects them to an interest in Australian flora and fauna. The book won the Miles Franklin Award in 1970 but still has only a few reviews listed. Stivens made his name as a writer of comic short stories often set among bush workers, but late in life came up with this book that anticipated the textual play of Peter Carey's generation fifteen years later and included aspects of literature's 'environmental turn' post-1990.

The central character, Harry Craddock, is an Oxford-educated heir to an Australian press baron's fortune. Insulated by his wealth and cosmopolitan outlook, he outrages his suburban neighbours by turning his garden into bushland and keeping a dingo as a pet. Harry restrains his rage at their ignorant hostility by recourse to naturalists like Konrad Lorenz. They shore up his posthuman view of people as following patterns of animal behaviour (Stivens 77, 140–41) and his proto-Anthropocene fears that human aggressiveness, nuclear weapons and air pollution threaten all survival, concluding that "man is an experiment of evolution and probably an unfortunate one" (Stivens 41–42). A genial womaniser and manic depressive, Harry bounces from one enthusiasm to another, but has built a reputation as an amateur ornithologist and he sets up an expedition to central Australia in search of the rumoured survival of the otherwise deemed extinct Night Parrot.

The narrative operates as a set of nested texts that create complex weavings and erratic bricolage. After two pages of epigraphs headed by a verse by Mad Tom of Bedlam, an editor presents and annotates Harry's memoir. This includes his own entry in *Who's Who*, his estranged wife's diary entries, his psychiatrist's case notes, spoof letters of confession to the psychiatrist, poems imitating sixteenth-century verse, an explorer's journal, blank pages inviting us to substitute a reading of

Rousseau or other reflections on autobiography, and a host of literary allusion from *Hamlet* to Prufrock to Borges. We are told that Harry is a practical joker and inveterate liar. He writes from a psychiatric institution where he is confined for confessing to a murder that he didn't commit. This mix of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and postmodern fragmentation undoes our readerly hopes for mimetic reliability and accentuates the idea of truth residing in the traces of language. At one point, we are faced with three columns of text given the impossible task to read them simultaneously (Sterne 172). It points to the way we have to make sense of the work by cobbling together disparate components and conflicting 'facts' without any 'real' referent on which to anchor some 'truth.'

At the same time, there are distinct elements of politically invested writing. Both Craddock and his wife make clear denunciations of conscription and involvement in Vietnam. The satiric comedy tells us that Australia's ties to European flora and fauna are either silly or malign. The wife's diary entries are a lyrical example of nature writing, and we are clearly expected to lament the destruction of a species. Environmentalist commitment does not, however, inspire us to go forth and correct society to save nature. Human presence of itself (reflected in the novel's counterpoint with the explorer journals of Ernest Giles) is so entangled that, like the text, its outcomes are complicated and have to be sifted and adjudicated. There is no romantic sublime: hawks kill budgerigars, Aborigines eat parrots, and people shoot dingoes. What comes through to us is a general sense of existential unease infused with moments of hysterical levity but coloured in tones of despair. The central characters do (they think) discover a couple of night parrots, but rivalry among the expedition members and scrub fires caused by their presence result in the deaths of what could be the last remaining members of the ground-dwelling species. With echoes of *Lear*, Harry's self-examination includes meditations on ageing and death. The only Australian intertext with any claim to literary status is Ion Idriess's tellingly titled *Lasseter's Last Ride*. In the end, Harry Craddock, having mysteriously survived days of fevered wandering in the bush and worked through his hospitalisation, is distanced from all his female companions and walks, perhaps deliberately, into the path of a truck, echoing the suicide of his first love.

Crippling melancholy appears to be the final note. Nonetheless, what lingers in our minds is the exuberance of the text itself. There has been a turn to affect among critics aligned with literary activism that suggests a quest to find a mechanism that will retain the direct link between word and action that once was centred on the supposedly improving effects of social realism. Perhaps Stevens was anticipating the work of Lyotard and Rancière by showing how textual play within the space of the literary best conveys political energies by being 'indifferent' to social issues and setting up tensions between redemption and catastrophe that resolve little but generate a motive force of their own by "displaying and deciphering the symptoms of a state of things", allowing a conflict between "a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of things" (Ranciere 161, 139).

Josephine Wilson teaches creative writing and art and design while also writing poetry and fiction. She won the 2017 Miles Franklin Award for her novel, *Extinctions* (2016). In keeping with its title, it opens with an old photo of the extinct New Zealand moa (a giant relation of the emu and cassowary) and ends with another historical photo of a dead Thylacine, the so-called Tasmanian Tiger, the last example of which expired in captivity in the 1930s.

Otherwise peppered with illustrations of inventions and constructions that reflect the interests of the engineer protagonist, the novel owes something to Sebald's *Austerlitz* and its modernist

patterning of motifs coupled with the engineer/ would-be architect's love of modernist design, and pedantic collecting of recondite words echoes the work of Gail Jones. Wilson's long epigraph begins:

Tales of extinction often begin near the end. The past is invoked – a prior Eden where wildness reigned and the dark earth was rich and generous, the air thick with the beating of feathers. We all know what will happen next. Over the page, just around the corner, is the massacre.

The book cites the mass killing of American buffalo and passenger pigeons and cites the Great Auk and the South African quagga as further instances of extinction. Once the deaths are done, the epigraph charts a silence, after which people begin to collect remains and stories and mourn the loss. The epigraph ends: "All is allegory". We and the novel wonder what is allegorical of what, whether brute mortality can, in fact, be captured in the metaphors and similes of the story (Wilson 32, 91, 114), and whether it even should be.

If the narrative is an allegory of our mourning the loss of extinct species, it is also, as the title suggests, about multiple extinctions and manifold mournings. Centred on the uptight engineer, Fred, who has moved into a retirement villa following the death of his wife, the book is structured in chapters headed "column," "bridge," "egg," "trench" and "hyperbolic paraboloid". Columns crack and topple, bridges collapse, eggs have fragile shells, as do the 'thin shelled structures' of modern buildings, and the trench refers to World War I and its effects on the protagonist's father, a violent bully and drunk. Fred is plunged into a trench of memory (the text shuttles between present and past, outer action and inner reverie) in which he confronts his failures as an inheritor of childhood trauma who tries to keep things firm and unchanging. He marries a New York Jew (invoking the extinctions of the Holocaust), they adopt a daughter who turns out to be part Aboriginal (allegorising the genocidal history of settler Australia), and his son ends up in permanent care following a suicidal car accident. Daughter Caroline is overseas, preparing an exhibition of extinct animal species. She herself is described as "a woman close to extinction" (Wilson 121). Wordplay features in the book, and Caroline is literally close to dead creatures, but as an adoptee with no contact with her birth mother, is the end of a family line, and she is also nearing menopause. Fred is frozen in trauma once his wife dies, haunted by all those dying around him and the silence and loss as all the details of a life are rendered extinct. But he is taken in hand by his bossy neighbour Jan, and in a series of misadventures learns to accept his failings, handle the memories that photos, toys and collected things impose on him, and adapt to new circumstances.

Extinctions is a clever multi-layered interweaving of motifs and ideas. The many mentions of cars, zimmer frames, wheelchairs, hydraulic lifts for the paralysed, and assorted inventions suggest the transhumanist desire to extend and perpetuate the human body. There is also a satiric moment when Caroline, who has led her long-time boyfriend through his academic career by introducing him to postcolonial theory, trauma theory, queer theory, loses him to a postgraduate student who "shook her post-humanist booty at him... He and the post-humanist had twins now" (Wilson 123). Stargazing is one motif in the book, which connects with parabolic curves as the orbits of planets and suggests the extinction of stars and a posthuman cosmos. However, like the paraboloid that holds together a suspension bridge and is the outline of an egg, the return of memory and the line of narrative is both a rise and fall as well as a fall and rise. Such ambiguity (the doubleness of allegory and language, perhaps) plunges us into extinctions and mournings of all kinds but serves as a line that pulls us up and back to a human-centred drama of recovery and redemption. The story forecloses on

massacre and falls short of the posthuman. Caroline reconnects with her Aboriginal family, who have survived colonial depredations. Fred is about to set up a new hybrid family, including his neglected son, and Caroline contacts an acquaintance in the hope of conceiving a child. The concluding photo of the soon-to-be-extinct Thylacine sits outside of the story. Perhaps it is an allegory of the limits of the human imagination: the silence beyond the tale, the limitations of this particular novel, or of all attempts to turn life and death into story, especially the lives and deaths of non-human creatures. Both of the photos of extinct animals, however, pair the dead creature with a human now also long dead, so perhaps the allegory is of our shared mortality and the need to deal with what comes at the end of everything, and like Fred, pushes us over the “fine line between watching and acting” (Wilson 70), past a frozen posthuman mourning into sustainable metahuman universe.

Richard Flanagan made a foray into magic realism with *Gould's Book of Fish* and into the modernist stream of consciousness with *Death of a River Guide* but has otherwise been a dedicated social realist. *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* (2020) is founded upon real-life actualities: people's addiction to Instagram, an enquiry into nefarious practices by banks (Flanagan 136), revelations about child abuse among church leaders (175, 214), wildfires in Tasmania and East Coast Australia (12–13), polar ice-caps melting (46), Australia's ageing population suffering from dementia, plus the extinction of myriad species of animals and birds (6–7). The text and the world it represents bombard us with more and more, its characters and its language becoming overwhelmed, stuttering and raging:

For a long time he had been aware of a growing scream that was within him and outside him.... More road noise, more fish stocks collapsing, more news noise more frogs and snakes dying out, more brexitrump climatecoal more and more, more fucking tourists everywhere, ... On his phone the government was calling for more coalmines new coal-fired power stations they'd gaol you for twenty-one years if you protest the same as murder now in Australia for calling bullshit on fire they couldn't get enough fire and smoke but he was scared, in truth he was t-t-terrified, he had had enough. Tasmania was where you came to get away from all that shit but now it was even here, ancient forests vanishing, beaches covered in crap, wild birds vomiting supermarket shopping bags, a world disappearing some terrible violence returning for a final reckoning.

How what why who? (5–6)

Other characters despair that life is becoming less and less. It is manifest at the magic realist level when bits of people begin to disappear. Annie discovers first a finger missing, then a knee: just spaces where skin and bone once were:

It wasn't much of a knee.

But now it had vanished she realised she missed it. But like the aurochs it was gone. Like the thylacine and the Walkman. Like long sentences. Like smoke-free summers. Gone, never to return. (79)

There's an echo here of Peter Carey's ground-breaking magic realism in his story “Do You Love Me?” As with Carey's story, Flanagan's focus is on a mother and her children. Ailing and in her eighties, Francie has been cared for by her ‘drop out’ artist and crayfisher son and his schizophrenic son. In a caustic commentary on the ideals of transhuman techno-enhancements of the mortal body, Flanagan has the two more financially successful children keeping the mother on life support in a hospital, where

she lives in a dream state fuelled by drugs. Annie, who knows enough to feel the cruelty of the love that keeps her mother alive, is the one who starts to find missing body parts. Her brother Terzo is a trader in venture capital and is all hard will, blind to the implications of doing deals with a Malaysian logging company (127). He is not sensitive enough to be vulnerable like his sister but shows how adamantian scientism and reason are desperate and brittle refusal to death and nature (77).

The disappearing body parts may not be a successful element of the book, but they push us beyond our comfort zone as readers, and signal the need for something new with which to confront the scales of the Anthropocene. Annie scrolls through her mobile phone, both using the plethora of detail as an escape from the immediate challenge of her mother and family history (94), and absorbing the increasing horror of planetary collapse:

It wasn't that these things were fragments, thought Anna. The world was fragments. She liked a meme she reposted she followed she no longer knew if the fires were already over even though they hadn't really yet begun. Things that happened yesterday were things happening today and things that hadn't happened tomorrow were old news several months ago. Was it only yesterday was it the future now? (87)

This Bachelardean sense of media flows and fused time challenges tidy narration. It reduces Annie to catatonia: feeling nothing, feeling herself as nothing, feeling incapable of doing anything (98). However, she quietly pulls together memories from the family past with which she rebuilds a caring understanding of her mother, and at one point, Francie's schizoid but self-aware grandson demands: "Shouldn't stories work towards something that we can't get anywhere else?... It wouldn't be enough, sure, But maybe it would be something" (144).

Flanagan is clearly trying to give us a realist reflection of the manic texture and intensity of contemporary chaos while also looking for a fictive vehicle to break through the wall of 'reality' into something that might find a way of living with and living against the insane ravages of the Anthropocene. He has read some of the theorising around environmental impacts: "*Solastalgia* emotion induced by the loss of everything. What is the image for nothing?" (103). He clearly rejects the political discourse of resilience and adaptation: "How did you adapt to your own murder, wondered Anna,... Were they adapting to their own extinction?" (141). If not, how could they counter the forces driving the world towards end times? Intensity of feeling (Anna's attribute) is not enough: it has not prevented her from caring enough for her son (159), who is now an antisocial gaming addict and vanishing faster than his mother; it doesn't stop her from giving in to Terzo's brutal instrumentalist version of aged care (163). It does perhaps impel her towards action, but of itself, it tends to freeze her in her tracks.

The machinery of book production parallels the thematics of the novel. Its mirrored face on the dust jacket both splits and connects, matching the dream/reality; sanity/madness doubling of the contents. The book carries the name of someone known as a Tasmanian. Its colophon identifies it with a New York publisher of some literary standing (Knopf), but it emanates from the Sydney branch of a British-American combine (Penguin Random House). It pillories global capitalism but is a creature of that very system. One message is that the world is a mess and the only way of dealing with it is an equally messy entanglement of conflicting feelings, facts, analysis, complicity and resistance (as with Colebrook and Braidotti). Within the story, we can see that the children's treatment of their mother

is simultaneously an expression of love, of fear of loss, of an attempt to be doing something against the deaths mounting up around them in the world, and of tyrannical human will.

Another message is indicated in the switch from the bleak blackness of the book's dust jacket to the glowing hard cover underneath, which features the glossy green of a parrot's feathers. In one way, this image reminds us of the beauty we are losing as birds succumb to environmental attacks. On another level, it points us to moments in the novel when characters access a mysterious sense of grace. Annie first finds it sitting in the sunshine with her mother (58), her grandfather, a scrabble-farm Irish migrant, would kneel outside every morning "With the immense universe vibrating in an out through hum, that universe which he understood as him also, Francie's father would each morning thank God for such beauty that there is in this world" (118, 192).

The vision is passed on to the long-suffering Francie. There is a resonance here of the posthuman theorist's desire to reject humanist rationalism, which on occasion takes refuge in the spiritual: in dreams akin to Biblical Revelation (apocalipsis). There's an early avatar in Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, when people caught in post-apocalypse chaos are rescued by mystical transfiguration into another mode of existence. There is an echo in environmentalist Deborah Bird Rose lamenting overheated bats and possums dropping dead out of trees and saying that prayer is the only possible response (Rose 2014). Flanagan is not endorsing such escapist wishful thinking or spiritual retreat, however. He does suggest a self-mortifying submission on the part of humans (a kneeling in and to creation like Annie's grandfather) but holds with the potential of restorative human interventions.

In the end, Annie meets Lisa, a scientist battling to save the orange-bellied parrot from extinction. Lisa admits that the birds may well die out but sees that the effort to prevent this is worthwhile, not as some act of human virtue-gathering but as homage to miracles of creation, migration, evolution, beauty (187). She connects the bird loss to the loss of Aboriginal land management practices and the deaths of Tasmanian Aborigines, noting that "someone did it", that we carry a debt as a result, that nothing ever totally vanishes, and that someone else has the duty to try to amend for all the destruction.

Annie suddenly is faced with her own increasing age and with the mixed legacy of feminism that fuelled her professional career: "Coming of age when women were told power was all, she had believed in power... Now she thought, power is a lie. Power is a trap. Power is an illusion" (198). When Terzo is killed in a motor accident, possibly a suicide driven by guilt at his elder brother's earlier suicide, she is left with "Ceremony, obligation, duty.... Homage to an idea" (212). Annie is seized by the urge to see things as they are: "the world as it presented itself to her. And if it revealed a bruised, damaged universe, still perhaps there would be in the very wound some hope" (239). She accepts that their preservation of her mother's existence and the relentless kindness of doctors and nurses was a lie "that postponing death was life" and it arises out of "the most terrible vanity" that is a pity: "sorrow grounded in the illusion of power" (246-7). Finally, Annie joins Lisa Shahn in northwest Tasmania to count the year's migration of orange-bellied parrots. She falls during a heart attack and enters a dream state in which she transforms into a series of wild creatures being hunted by humans driven by some life force, possessed by a wordless language of grief and loss and by a wonder at the extraordinary variety of the world, all of it moving through geological time towards a void. Annie's brother, Tommy, lets his mother finally escape from her hospital torment. Lisa finds one

nesting parrot, and in words that repeat the worshipful stance of Annie's grandfather's morning ritual, the book ends: "She was kneeling, waiting. She was ready. She was, she realised with amazement, not downcast nor defeated." (282).

Since it appears to be *de rigueur* these days in the humanities to cite a French philosopher, let me mention Jacques Rancière. His idea of *dissensus* as the disturbing of categories and the fuelling of activism allows art a certain autonomy (or distinctiveness) while seeing its place and its effects as opening it up to social forces (116–117), though it resolves to a rather unpromising observation: "Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy and thrives on that ambiguity.... those who want it to fulfil its political promise are condemned to a certain melancholy." (133). Avoiding melancholy in arts engaging with the Anthropocene often results in endings that deflect "political accomplishment" into wish fulfilment fantasy (a danger in Flanagan's book) or fall back on old-style human-centred closure (as in Wilson's *Extinctions*).

In Flanagan, the final message is suitably ambiguous. We need to do something to resist entropy and human careless violence, but that should not be an exercise of human will over the nature of which we are part. Flanagan's story is constructed around a human drama, but is not altogether human-centred, being more of a testament to the fragility of both people and the planet. There is possibly a hint of Gaia optimism in its resolution, but not a suggestion that we let the planet sort out its own problems, most of which we have caused.

Joshua Lobb's loosely linked set of short stories, *The Flight of Birds* (2019), engages with melancholy and tries to address creatively some of the challenges presented by theorists in animal studies: human entanglement with non-human animals, imagining a (literally) bird's-eye view of the world, dealing emotionally with species extinctions. One of his stories, "And No Birds Sing", presents a mentally disturbed man listing bird losses and wailing uncontrollably. The right-hand margin of each page records 112 extinct bird species from across the globe. Counterpointing this crippling lamentation, the next story is set in the future tense. The narrator is a young ornithologist monitoring the breeding program for the migratory Gould's petrel on a Queensland island threatened by the introduction of rabbits. but despite everything his daughter and her team persist in their preservation efforts. Like the prophets of old, they use birds to chart the future:

'It may be a future without them. Or without us.'

'I don't want to think that,' I'll say.

'We don't have a choice,' [her supervisor replies.] (199)

He envisages an endless relocation of nest boxes to islands that remain above the waterline. The young woman is accompanied by her father, who is mourning his wife and lost home and projects anxieties onto declining bird populations. Faced with over-fishing, pollution from fish farming, and rising sea levels, he cannot find hope even in newborn chicks. The father asks, "Doesn't this—doesn't all of this—make you angry? Doesn't it sadden you?" The story ends, "'We don't have time for sadness,' I'll say to him. 'Come on, we've got work to do'" (201). As I was drafting this paper, a news item caught my eye. Judicious breeding of remnant orange-bellied parrots has brought the species back from the brink of extinction. (Denholm). This in itself is not enough, but, like the engaged fantasy of Flanagan's novel and Lobb's story, it is maybe something as long as we keep working at it.

Matthew Calarco concludes his philosophical explorations with the comment that “Any effort to move beyond humanism and anthropological difference will itself have to become an entire way of life... the result of a set of sustained passions for and repeated experiments with other ways of carrying out daily life” (82). With Levinas, he sees rituals of reformation and revision. This is a useful point on which to consider the place of literature in the posthuman project. It can function as a ritual ‘pause’ in the everyday, a refocusing of attention, an opening into seeing differently, and as ritual is a repetitive call to us to renew our compact with nature no matter how overwhelming the challenge or fallible our attempts may be. Art/the humanities pushes past/through thinking of everything as calculation, commodity and utility, but remains tied to human-centred norms of seeing, narrativizing, and managing affect. It may be a form of voyeuristic enviro-disaster porn (Rancière 136), or it may provoke us to activism, but even as it presents us with images of apocalypse, it enables us to think of ourselves as eternally present (Colebrook 143), as the central actors or interpreters of everything, and as ever-creative makers. So, we need to think with art but also beyond it to take in frameworks of making and aesthetics, as Rosi Braidotti proposes in what she calls ‘critical posthumanities’ and position these frameworks within earth’s ecosystems and its needs.

Notes

ⁱ Sometimes that means conferring human characteristics onto animals so we can see our unjust practices highlighted, as in Shaun Tan’s story where a bear lawyer takes humans to court for criminal maltreatment of animals. It also requires that we represent ourselves not as paternalistic readers of nature, but rather as creatures of nature immersed in the world in the same way as the animals and plants we selectively represent or ignore. There are many stories that amount to anthropological studies of wayward children as young animals, but these usually function entirely within or are judged from human social contexts as exceptional, especially when they enact their difference by straying into the wild of nature. Think of Kipling’s Mowgli or the wild boy in David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life*. Defoe’s Crusoe, thrown into a world of nature, proceeds to construct a human society on his desert wilderness, where he lords it over animals and cultivates plants. J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* imagines a posthuman scene, something closer to the real castaway, who lost language and merged into the wind and rock of his island.

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