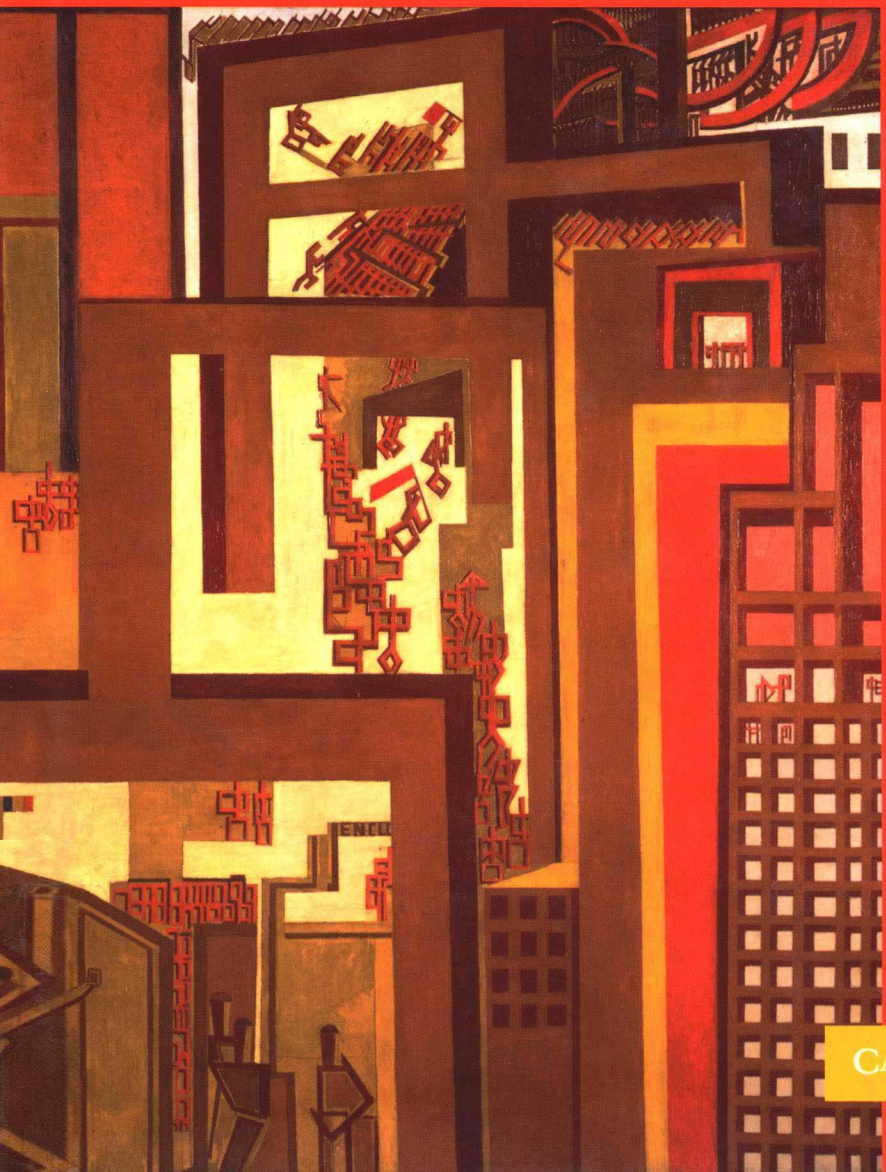
PAUL SHEEHAN

Modernism, Narrative and Humanism



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MODERNISM, NARRATIVE AND HUMANISM

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

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

For G. R. and J. S. Sheehan

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

Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*

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

Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*

Preface

> To have humanism we must first be convinced of our humanity. As we move further into decadence this becomes more difficult.
>
> Thomas Pynchon[1]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

The anthropometric turn

Formal realism, in fact, is the narrative embodiment of a premise that Defoe and Richardson accepted very literally, but which is implicit in the novel form in general: the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience . . .

Ian Watt[1]

What relation does the novel have to human being, human life, humanism? Its most obvious characteristic is the ability to encode life into text, by drawing on the conventions of 'formal realism'. Compared with epic poetry and literary ballads, the novel has a greater purchase on mimesis, and against the short story and the novella it has the potential breadth to convey a life, a saga, a tradition.[2] The novel, of all literary forms, can most comfortably contain the arc of history, from the personal to the global. By these lights, the *roman fleuve* is perhaps the epitome of the form.

Ian Watt maps the origins of the novel on to the beginning of modern philosophy. It was in his method, writes Watt, that Descartes attained greatness. In contrast with his predecessors, the French philosopher's pursuit of truth was conceived as a wholly individual matter, as a clean break with precedent and tradition. The literary form of the novel recapitulates these interwoven notions of individualism and innovation. In its aim, 'truth to individual experience', the novel could not help but strike a unique chord. Defoe's procedure reveals this Cartesian analogue: '[Defoe's] total subordination of the plot to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir is as defiant an assertion of the primacy of individual experience in the novel as Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* was in philosophy.'[3]

The novel has ties not only with individualism and innovation, but with the quintessentially human attribute of logic. The novel, writes Hugh Kenner, is 'the bastard son begotten by empirical science upon a dormant Muse, and it has been cursed with logical crosses from the day it learned to talk'.[4] But does this make it a specifically *humanist* modality, the literary form of humanism? The clearest link between the humanist tradition and the novel is the *Bildungsroman.* Humanism's central theme, established during the Renaissance, was human potentiality. Man possessed latent powers of creativity, which could only be released through formal education. In German letters humanism is associated with *Bildung*, the tradition of education through self-cultivation. But this association is not unequivocal. On the one hand, it was Wilhelm von Humboldt, the architect of the Prussian education system, who did more than anyone else to establish the concept of *Bildung* in an institutional context.[5] But on the other, *Bildung* in general is a much more diffuse process of individual growth and evolution, an expression of bourgeois humanism rather than a narrow marker of educational accomplishment.[6]

The novelistic genre that emerges bears this out. The typical *Bildungsroman* plot begins with the protagonist's childhood in the country or the provinces, a childhood marred by paternalistic constraint. To free his imagination from these fetters, the protagonist must escape to the city.

Significantly, traditional pedagogy has failed him by this point, left him frustrated rather than fulfilled. It is experience of urban life that furnishes him with real 'education'. Sexual encounters stimulate soul-searching and value-reappraisal, marking his rite of passage to the modern world and to maturity. Once this has been achieved he can return to the family home, to put in relief the success of his entry into modern life. Jerome H. Buckley summarises this journey as 'childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy'.[7]

Education, then, is not outwardly imparted to the individual through humanistic pedagogy, but wrested into shape inwardly as the self struggles to take shape, to become fully integrated, under the pressure of urban social encounter both physical (sexual) and mental (philosophical). So although the *Bildungsroman* draws heavily on the Renaissance model of humanism as *potentiality*, of the self awaiting instruction in order to come into its own, the way in which this happens resembles a proto-Romantic self-forging. It is no surprise to recall that Goethe, who established the *Bildungsroman* in 1795–6 with *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, had already engendered the prototype for the Byronic hero some two decades earlier in *The Sorrows of Young Werther.*

Georg Lukács defines *Wilhelm Meister*'s theme (and, by extension, the quintessential shape of the *Bildungsroman*) as 'the reconciliation of the problematic individual, guided by his lived experience of the ideal with concrete social reality'.[8] This is the tradition of *Bildung*, of self-development or self-culture, transplanted to the arena of societal encounter. Yet unlike the Romantic paradigm – which also focused intently on the inner life – society is not an abiding impediment to self-realisation. Indeed, social experience is crucial for the hero properly to develop and integrate his powers; it is self-cultivation that is the goal, not self-transcendence.[9] Thus the *Bildungsroman* is concerned not with self *per se* but with transformation of self – by family, by bourgeois society, by history. The difference is not a negligible one. It finally serves to close the gap (opened up by the Romantic analogue) between the *Bildungsroman* and humanistic *Bildung.*

However, at the very inception of the genre – encoded in its DNA, as it were – is a recessive chromosome. Thirty years before *Wilhelm Meister* the generic paradigm for the *Bildungsroman* took shape with C. M. Wieland's *History of Agathon.* Michael Beddow describes its emergence as a response to a perennial dilemma: the Enlightenment inability to reconcile the Cartesian coordinates of mind and extension.

Like so many of his European contemporaries, Wieland was troubled by the implications of mechanistic explanations of the physical world for traditional views about the nature and status of man. He had himself strongly felt the plausibility of each of two incompatible extreme positions: assimilation of human consciousness to the mechanical laws of the physical world, and the strict separation of human spirituality from material reality. Unable to give singleminded assent to either of these positions, but unable either to find any discursive philosophy that resolved the conflict between them to his satisfaction, he turned to a type of imaginative literature of his own devising. Through prose fiction of the kind he created in *Agathon*, he hoped to engage his readers' imaginative powers in the task of establishing a true picture of human nature, such as strictly philosophical reflection could not, in his view, provide.[10]

If Cartesian individualism gave to the novel a model of subjectivity, Cartesian dualism provided the dilemma that only the *Bildungsroman* could overcome: Enlightenment frustration with the relationship between *res cogitans* (rational human subjects) and *res extensa* (lifeless objects, including animals). The 'solution' proffered was to see discursive philosophy as a kind of category mistake. It is *fiction* that can perform this task, not philosophy. But the problem nonetheless remains, as a kind of 'philosophical unconscious' within the genre, an epistemological conundrum that can only be addressed by adopting a different set of terms. The Cartesian dilemma, therefore, is not so much a staging device as a congenital condition, immanent rather than epigenic.

Franco Moretti's designation of the *Bildungsroman* as 'the "symbolic form" of modernity' takes on a different cast in this context.[11] Moretti argues that Europe is plunged into modernity, in the wake of the Industrial and French Revolutions, so unexpectedly that European culture lags behind. Europe's experience of modernity is therefore premature, even illegitimate. The *Bildungsroman* conveys this illegitimacy in two ways. The peregrinations of its protagonist describe a forging of values on the hoof, as it were, in the absence of a suitable mentor or pedagogue (actual father or father-figure). There is no 'great system' for acquiring knowledge that the protagonist can participate in. He becomes educated under adversarial circumstances – not from the measured pedagogy of the university, but through self-forged learning on the streets, living by his wits. Formally, too, the *Bildungsroman* is, in its inaugural state, a miscegenated, 'illegitimate' form. Though *Wilhelm Meister* is ostensibly a novel, literary debate rubs shoulders with criticism, poetry with song. The *Bildungsroman* – the 'bastard' form – survives 'because of its ability to accentuate modernism's dynamism and instability'.[12] This instability is present in the genre, as we

have just seen, almost before it comes into being. Its congenital uncertainty will become more pronounced as the novel is reshaped by modernity, mutating to accommodate itself to modernity's diversifying energies.

Although the *Bildungsroman* stresses the protagonist's moral destination, the narrative's teleology is questionable. Individual inclination comes up against social necessity, resulting in the hero's achieving a different goal from the one expected.[13] Human agency is not ruled out entirely, but the vicissitudes of social formation serve to *ironise* it. Writ large, it echoes a particular view of history, as Arthur Danto observes:

> But Vico really required reference to human intentions in his historical explanations, and so do all philosophies of history which pretend to interpret history as *irony*, where men not only make their history and in ways they never intended: but where what they bring about rather is *counter* to their intentions. Vico for one, and Hegel and Marx for others, suppose history globally to exhibit irony in this sense.[14]

'Outcome' as an ironical consequence of 'intention' is symptomatic of agential dispersal, between human and nonhuman. Systems and structures exceed the controlling power underwritten by the *cogito*, claiming for themselves a degree of autonomous self-persistence.[15] In Chapter 2 this dialectical process of human-nonhuman interaction is discussed in relation to forms of technology.

The *Bildungsroman*, the genre of fiction supposedly existing as a shining example of integrated selfhood, had a troubled inception and contains, as we have just seen, the seeds of philosophical uncertainty. It is not just formal realism, Cartesian individualism and *Bildung* that authorise the shift from philosophical thinking to imaginative involvement, but something much more fundamental to the novel, to *all* novels: narrative logic. It is narrative that enables the temporal dimension of human nature to be expressed, making it possible to demonstrate the growth of subjectivity without confronting the impasse of Cartesian dualism. 'To raise the question of the nature of narrative', writes Hayden White, 'is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself.'[16] Thus narrative can serve as the structuring principle linking the human to the novel, to modernism, and to philosophical reflection.

The genre of the *Bildungsroman*, it seems clear from the above, is essential to an emplotment of the transactions between the human (humanism, *humanitas*) and the novel. Its antagonist is the experimental, formally diverse modernist novel, with its fraught negotiations between *anthropos*