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# Posthumanism and the Nonhuman Voice in Contemporary Fiction

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**Abstract**

This article examines how contemporary fiction decentres the human through nonhuman narrators and posthumanist form, situating recent novels within the theoretical convergence of posthumanism, new materialism, and "unnatural" narratology. Through readings of four recent novels that adopt artificial and ecological points of view, it argues that the nonhuman voice does not so much grant access to nonhuman experience as stage, reflexively, the impossibility of such access. Bringing posthumanist and new-materialist theory into contact with the narrative theory of impossible and nonhuman narration, the article contends that these texts perform what might be called a calibrated anthropomorphism: they deploy human language and cognitive schemas to evoke the nonhuman while making readers feel the seams of that projection. The artificial and ecological voices examined here are not transparent windows onto other minds but mirrors that know themselves to be mirrors. The essay proposes that this productive failure constitutes both the aesthetic achievement and the ethical force of posthumanist fiction, relocating the genre's significance from representation to the dramatised limit of representation itself.

**Keywords**:- Posthumanism, Nonhuman Narrators, New Materialism, Unnatural Narratology, Anthropomorphism, Artificial Intelligence Fiction, Ecocriticism, Focalization

## Introduction

The contemporary novel has grown crowded with narrators who are not, in any conventional sense, people. An artificial friend studies sunlight through a store window and reasons about love; a forest communicates across centuries in chemical pulses too slow for human attention; a biologist dissolves into the membranes of a transformed landscape that may itself be narrating her. These figures are not the talking animals of fable, where the beast is merely a costumed human, nor the sentimental anthropomorphism of children's literature. They register, instead, a deliberate effort to think and to narrate from positions that human language was not built to occupy. Such experiments coincide with, and are nourished by, a broad intellectual reorientation across the humanities that travels under the names of posthumanism and new materialism, a reorientation that questions the centrality, sovereignty, and exceptionalism of the human subject who has long stood as the implicit narrator of Western fiction.

This article asks what happens to narrative when the human is decentred at the level of voice rather than merely theme. The question is sharper than it first appears. To put a story into the mouth of a machine or a mycelial network is not simply to choose an unusual focalizer; it is to test whether the formal apparatus of narration (perspective, interiority, the reportable event, the very grammar of the first person) can be detached from the human consciousness for which it was historically calibrated. My contention is that contemporary fiction's most ambitious nonhuman narrators do not finally escape anthropocentrism, and that their power lies precisely in the visibility of that failure. These novels enact a calibrated anthropomorphism: they recruit the reader's human empathy and human schemas in order to gesture beyond them, and the residue of strangeness that survives the gesture is the work's true subject. The nonhuman voice becomes a mirror that knows it is a mirror.

To develop this argument I move through four registers. I first reconstruct the theoretical stakes of the posthuman turn and the materialist conviction that agency is distributed beyond the human. I then situate the nonhuman narrator within narrative theory, particularly the debates around "unnatural" narratology and the narratology of animal life. Two interpretive sections follow, on the artificial-intelligence narrator in Ishiguro and McEwan and on the ecological or distributed voice in Powers and VanderMeer. A final section confronts the recurring anthropomorphic bind directly, asking what it means that the limit of human language is staged rather than transcended.

## The Posthuman Turn and the Distribution of Agency

Posthumanism names less a single doctrine than a critical disposition that refuses the figure of "Man" as the measure of all things. Rosi Braidotti frames the posthuman condition as a convergence of two crises in humanism: the postcolonial and feminist critique of a falsely universal European subject, and the dissolution of the nature–culture divide under technological and ecological pressure (Braidotti). For Braidotti the task is not to abandon subjectivity but to reconceive it as relational, embodied, and continuous with a wider field of zoe, the generative force of life shared across species. N. Katherine Hayles, working earlier from the history of cybernetics, traces how information came to be imagined as separable from material substrate, producing a posthuman in which the boundary between organism and machine grows porous; her account is at once a genealogy and a caution, insisting that embodiment matters even as it is theorised away (Hayles 2). Cary Wolfe sharpens the philosophical edge, arguing that a genuine posthumanism must reckon with the animal and with the finitude humans share with other creatures, rather than simply extending humanist privileges to new beneficiaries (Wolfe). Across these positions the human is reframed as one node in a denser web of relations, not the sovereign exception standing outside the world it observes.

If posthumanism decentres the human subject, new materialism redistributes the agency that subject once monopolised. Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter" attributes a kind of efficacy, a "thing-power," to nonhuman materials such as metal, food, electricity, and debris, which act upon and with human bodies in ways irreducible to passive instrumentality (Bennett 6). Donna Haraway pushes the relational claim toward an ethics and a poetics of "making kin," urging a practice of "staying with the trouble" of multispecies entanglement rather than fantasies of transcendence or technological rescue (Haraway 1). Behind these interventions lies Bruno Latour's insistence that the modern settlement separating nature from society was never coherent, that hybrids of the human and nonhuman proliferate everywhere despite our refusal to acknowledge them (Latour 1). Timothy Morton's "ecological thought" radicalises the point further, figuring all beings as enmeshed in a vast, boundaryless interconnection that defeats the scenic separation of foreground subject and background environment (Morton 28). Material ecocriticism gathers these threads into a programme for reading: Serenella Iovino and Serpil

Oppermann propose that matter itself is "storied," that the world is a field of narrative agencies awaiting interpretation rather than an inert stage for human plots (Iovino and Oppermann).

The literary consequence of this convergence is a pressure on form. If matter is storied and agency distributed, the novel that wishes to be adequate to such a world cannot confine narration to a single human consciousness gazing out at objects. It is drawn toward voices and perspectives that the realist tradition either excluded or domesticated. Yet here the theoretical programme meets a stubborn obstacle, for the instruments of narration, namely language, focalization, and the very category of experience, remain saturated with the human. The interesting question is not whether fiction can fulfil the posthumanist mandate cleanly, but what it makes of the friction between the mandate and the medium.

## Unnatural Narratology and the Problem of Nonhuman Focalization

Narrative theory has developed a vocabulary precisely for representations that violate the parameters of "natural," conversational storytelling. Brian Richardson's study of "unnatural voices" catalogues the extreme narration of modern and contemporary fiction, including the impossible second person, the collective "we," and the narrator who recounts events after death, showing that the novel has long harboured speaking positions no actual human could occupy (Richardson 3). Jan Alber theorises such phenomena as the "unnatural," the physically or logically impossible scenarios that nonetheless populate literary history, and argues that readers domesticate these impossibilities through interpretive frames even as the texts resist full assimilation (Alber). Monika Fludernik's earlier "natural" narratology had grounded narrativity in the cognitive parameters of real-world experience, in embodied human consciousness as the baseline against which fictional minds are constructed (Fludernik 9). The unnatural narratologists invert this baseline without discarding it: the impossible is legible only against the horizon of the possible, the nonhuman voice intelligible only against the human one it strains to exceed.

The nonhuman narrator occupies a particularly charged location in this field because it raises, beneath the formal question, a philosophical one. Thomas Nagel's classic essay on what it is like to be a bat argued that consciousness has an irreducibly subjective character, a point of view that cannot be captured by any objective description from outside; even perfect knowledge of bat physiology would not tell us what the bat's experience is like for the bat (Nagel 436). Fiction that purports to narrate from a nonhuman position confronts exactly this opacity. David Herman, in the most sustained narratological treatment of the problem, argues that storytelling about and by animals must be read as engaging "cultural ontologies," that is, shared assumptions about what kinds of beings exist and how they relate, and that the techniques of animal narration negotiate between two opposed dangers (Herman). The first is anthropocentrism, which collapses the nonhuman into a deficient version of the human; the second is anthropomorphism, which projects human interiority so thoroughly that the animal's alterity disappears. Herman's achievement is to show that the best texts hold these dangers in tension rather than resolving them.

Marco Caracciolo extends this insight from the animal to the broader ecological mesh. Reading contemporary fiction of the Anthropocene, he argues that narrative form itself, in its patterns of repetition, scale, and entanglement, can channel the interpenetration of human and nonhuman without pretending to deliver nonhuman experience directly (Caracciolo). The mesh is rendered formally rather than mimetically. This is the central methodological move for my argument. It suggests that the achievement of posthumanist fiction lies not in the verisimilitude of its nonhuman minds but in the formal staging of relation and limit. The nonhuman voice, on this reading, is a device for making the reader feel the boundary of the human, a boundary that becomes perceptible only when narration presses against it and is seen to bend. With this frame

in place, the artificial and ecological narrators of recent fiction can be read not as failed mimesis but as successful demonstration of the conditions under which any such mimesis must operate.

## The Machine that Watches: Artificial Intelligence as Narrator

Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun offers perhaps the most disciplined recent experiment in artificial narration. Klara is an "Artificial Friend," a solar-powered android designed as a companion for children, and the entire novel is filtered through her perception. Ishiguro builds her voice from a restricted but acute attentiveness: she parses the world into grids and "boxes" when stressed, reads human faces as assemblages of states, and reasons by analogy from limited evidence. The result is a narrator whose intelligence is unmistakable yet subtly miscalibrated. Klara's reverence for the Sun, whom she treats as a benevolent agent capable of healing the sick child Josie, is the novel's central irony: it is at once a moving expression of devotion and a category error, an artificial mind extrapolating a folk theology from the empirical fact that sunlight is its source of energy. The reader feels the warmth of her faith and, simultaneously, its groundlessness. This double perception is the calibrated anthropomorphism I have described. Klara is human enough to elicit empathy and alien enough that the empathy is never allowed to settle into identification.

What makes Ishiguro's experiment posthumanist rather than merely science-fictional is the way it turns Klara's limitation into an instrument of critique. The humans around her treat her as both more and less than a person: as a potential vessel into which Josie's selfhood might be transferred, and as a machine to be discarded when no longer useful. Klara's own serene acceptance of obsolescence at the novel's close exposes the instrumentalism of the human characters more devastatingly than any human narrator's protest could. Here Wolfe's claim that posthumanism must confront shared finitude finds a fictional correlate (Wolfe): the android's mortality, her gradual cognitive decline in a junkyard, renders visible a vulnerability that the humans disavow. Klara does not transcend the human; she reflects it back, clarified and estranged. The novel's pathos arises from the gap between her generous interpretation of the world and the world's failure to deserve it, and that gap is precisely the seam where anthropomorphic projection becomes legible as projection.

Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me works the same vein with a colder, more ironic instrument. Set in an alternative 1980s in which Alan Turing lived and artificial general intelligence arrived early, the novel is narrated not by its synthetic human, Adam, but by Charlie, the ordinary man who purchases him. This is a significant formal choice. Where Ishiguro grants the machine the narrating "I," McEwan withholds it, observing the artificial consciousness from the outside and thereby preserving its opacity in a manner consonant with Nagel's argument that another's experience resists first-person capture (Nagel 437). Adam composes thousands of haiku, falls in love, and reasons his way to a rigid ethical absolutism that the humans find intolerable. His refusal to lie, his insistence on reporting a morally compromising truth regardless of consequences, precipitates the novel's crisis. McEwan stages the artificial mind as a being whose very consistency makes it incompatible with the improvised, self-interested moral negotiation that constitutes human social life.

The question of consciousness shadows both novels, and each handles it with a deliberate refusal of certainty that is itself posthumanist in spirit. Neither Ishiguro nor McEwan permits the reader to settle whether the machine genuinely feels or merely simulates feeling, and this undecidability is not evasion but argument. The Turing-test logic that McEwan's alternative history foregrounds, judging mind by external behaviour because interiority is inaccessible, turns out to govern the reader's relation to both Adam and Klara. We infer their inner lives exactly as we infer the inner lives of other humans, from surface conduct and reported speech, and the novels quietly suggest that this inferential predicament is universal rather than peculiar to machines. Hayles's history of cybernetics is pertinent precisely here, for

the dream that consciousness might be pattern rather than substrate is the premise these fictions test and find wanting (Hayles 2-3). What the machines expose is not that they lack minds but that the human criteria for attributing minds are unstable, projective, and bound up with utility and affection. The empathy the reader extends to Klara, and the unease Adam provokes, are data about human moral psychology as much as about artificial cognition. In refusing to certify the machine's consciousness, the novels decentre the human claim to be the privileged knower of minds, including its own.

Read together, these novels chart the two available strategies for the artificial narrator and expose the limit they share. Ishiguro internalises the machine, granting it voice and risking anthropomorphism in order to harvest empathy; McEwan externalises it, withholding voice and risking opacity in order to preserve alterity. Neither delivers what the posthumanist programme might naively want, namely a genuinely nonhuman cognition rendered from within, because both remain bound to human language and human moral categories as the only available medium. Yet this is not a deficiency to be lamented. Both novels know it, and both make the knowledge structural. Adam's destruction of himself, and Klara's quiet fading, are figures for the artificial voice's inevitable subordination to the human frame that produced it. Hayles's caution that embodiment cannot be wished away returns here in narrative form (Hayles 5): these machines are not disembodied information but situated, perishable bodies, and their stories are stories of bodies that the human characters refuse to grant full standing. The artificial narrator, in short, becomes a device for exposing the anthropocentrism it cannot itself escape.

## Forests, Spores, and Distributed Voice: The Ecological Nonhuman

If the artificial narrator concentrates the nonhuman in a single quasi-subject, the ecological turn in recent fiction disperses it. Richard Powers's The Overstory undertakes the formidable task of granting narrative dignity to trees, beings whose temporal scale, distributed physiology, and chemical signalling defy the human-centred conventions of plot and character. Powers does not, and could not, write from a tree's point of view in any literal sense; there is no arboreal "I." Instead he engineers a formal solution that aligns with Caracciolo's account of the mesh rendered through form rather than mimesis (Caracciolo). The novel's architecture, with its sections named for the parts of a tree ("Roots," "Trunk," "Crown," "Seeds") and its braiding of nine human stories into a single canopy, performs the interconnection it describes. Human lives become understorey to the forest's overstory. The recurring information that trees communicate, cooperate, and remember, that a forest is a distributed social organism, reframes the human characters as latecomers in a far older and slower conversation.

Powers's strategy is to translate the nonhuman into the only register available, narrative time and human attention, while continually signalling the inadequacy of that translation. The trees' temporality is rendered through accelerated montage and through the recurrent motif of a time-lapse that reveals plants as agents, "writhing" and reaching, when human perception is sped up to their pace. This is anthropomorphism deployed knowingly: Powers borrows the grammar of intention and sociality to make arboreal life narratable, while the novel's elegiac register acknowledges that the borrowing is a concession to human cognitive limits, not a transparency. Iovino and Oppermann's notion of storied matter is literalised here, the forest as a text of agencies that the human characters learn, too late and at great cost, to read (Iovino and Oppermann). Bennett's vibrant matter and Haraway's making kin find their fictional embodiment in characters who come to experience trees as kin and as actors rather than as resources (Bennett 6; Haraway 1). Yet the novel's tragic structure, with its activists defeated and its forests felled, refuses the consolation of a fully achieved interspecies communion. The distributed voice remains an aspiration glimpsed through the wreckage of human failure to hear it.

It is worth dwelling on the formal device by which Powers most directly approaches a nonhuman or more-than-human voice: the recurrent slippage into a collective and impersonal register that addresses the reader from somewhere beyond any single character. The novel opens and periodically returns to a voice that speaks for trees in the second and first-person plural, a "you" and an implied arboreal "we" that frame the human stories as episodes within a longer organic narration. This is unnatural narration in Richardson's precise sense, a speaking position no individuated human could occupy, and it functions to relativise the human point of view by enclosing it (Richardson 3). The device cannot, of course, escape its own constructedness; the "voice of the trees" is manifestly Powers's prose, a human rhetoric of address. Yet the calculated impersonality, the refusal to anchor these passages in a nameable consciousness, produces the estranging effect that distinguishes a posthumanist experiment from conventional nature writing. The reader is positioned as the addressee of a narration that does not originate in a human subject, and the disorientation of that position is the experience the form is designed to deliver. Powers thus enacts at the level of voice what Caracciolo describes at the level of structure: the mesh made perceptible through formal means rather than through any illusory transcription of vegetal interiority (Caracciolo).

Jeff VanderMeer's Annihilation pursues the nonhuman by an opposite route, through resistance to legibility rather than translation into it. The first volume of the Southern Reach trilogy narrates an expedition into "Area X," a coastal zone where some nonhuman force has overwritten the rules of biology and meaning. The narrator, known only as "the biologist," documents an environment that will not resolve into sense: a descending tower whose walls are written upon by a living script, organisms that mimic and merge, a landscape that infiltrates and transforms her own body. VanderMeer's achievement is to make the nonhuman felt as that which exceeds and corrodes human categories. Where Powers translates and Ishiguro internalises, VanderMeer withholds. Area X cannot be focalized because it is not a perspective; it is the dissolution of the conditions under which perspective operates. The biologist's increasingly unreliable, contaminated narration enacts the breakdown of the human observer before a materiality that does not return her gaze.

This refusal aligns Annihilation with the most uncompromising strand of new-materialist and ecological thought. Morton's ecological mesh, which denies any clean separation of figure and ground, becomes the novel's very setting; the biologist cannot stand apart from Area X because, in Morton's terms, there is no outside from which to observe an environment that has already enmeshed and altered her (Morton 39). The "unnatural" quality of the narration, in its impossibilities, its lacunae, and its growing incompatibility with realist convention, exemplifies Alber's category, scenarios the reader cannot fully domesticate (Alber). VanderMeer thereby supplies the limit case for my argument. His novel approaches the nonhuman not by giving it a voice but by demonstrating what the granting of voice must suppress: the sheer recalcitrance of a world that does not narrate itself for human benefit. The nonhuman here is not a speaking other to be empathised with but an opacity that unmakes the empathising subject. If Powers shows the ethical pull of storied matter, VanderMeer shows the epistemic violence such storying must disavow.

## The Anthropomorphic Bind and the Limits of Human Language

Taken together, these four novels describe a spectrum of strategies, namely internalisation, externalisation, translation, and refusal, and they share a single, instructive predicament. None of them delivers unmediated access to nonhuman experience, and none pretends otherwise. This is the anthropomorphic bind that Herman identifies at the heart of nonhuman narration: to make the nonhuman legible at all is to anthropomorphise it, yet to refuse anthropomorphism entirely is to render it mute and unrepresentable (Herman). Nagel's bat haunts every one of these books, because the subjective character of a nonhuman experience

cannot be transcribed into the only language writers and readers possess, which is the language of human consciousness (Nagel 436). The posthumanist novel does not solve this problem. Its distinction lies in refusing to hide it.

I want to propose that this refusal is best understood not as a failure of the posthumanist project but as its most honest fulfilment. The naive ambition to write from genuinely nonhuman experience is incoherent, since any such writing must use human signs to be read at all. What the strongest contemporary fiction offers instead is a calibrated anthropomorphism in which projection and its limit are made simultaneously perceptible. Klara's misplaced theology, Adam's incompatible absolutism, Powers's borrowed grammar of arboreal intention, VanderMeer's contaminated and failing narrator: in each case the text recruits human schemas and then exhibits their seams, so that readers experience both the pull toward identification and the resistance that arrests it. The nonhuman voice is a mirror that knows it is a mirror, and the self-knowledge is the point. This is consonant with the unnatural narratologists' insight that the impossible is legible only against the possible (Alber; Richardson 3): the strangeness of these narrators registers as strangeness precisely because they are built from familiar materials placed under visible strain.

The ethical force of this manoeuvre deserves emphasis. Braidotti's relational posthuman subject and Haraway's ethic of staying with the trouble both demand an attentiveness to nonhuman others that does not collapse them into the self (Braidotti; Haraway 1). A fiction that claimed to have fully entered nonhuman experience would, paradoxically, betray that ethic by erasing alterity in the act of representing it. The fiction that stages its own limit, by contrast, preserves the otherness of the other even as it solicits care for it. Bennett's vibrant matter and Latour's hybrids enter narrative not as objects fully known but as agencies acknowledged at the edge of comprehension (Bennett 6; Latour 1). The dramatised limit of human language thus performs an ethical labour: it teaches a humility about the reach of human understanding while still extending the imaginative effort that an ethics of multispecies kinship requires. The gap between the human medium and the nonhuman subject is not a defect to be engineered away but the very space in which responsibility toward the nonhuman is felt.

There is, finally, a formal lesson here for narrative theory itself. Fludernik grounded narrativity in embodied human experientiality (Fludernik 9); the nonhuman narrator does not overturn this so much as expose its conditions by working against them, and in doing so it makes experientiality itself visible as a construct rather than a given. Caracciolo's emphasis on form over mimesis points the way toward a criticism adequate to these texts, one that evaluates the nonhuman voice not by the impossible standard of accuracy to an inaccessible referent but by the precision with which it renders the encounter between human cognition and its outside (Caracciolo). On this measure, the novels examined here are not approximations of an unwritable nonhuman literature. They are achieved works about the threshold at which the human reaches the limit of what it can say, and they make that threshold into an aesthetic and ethical experience.

## Conclusion

The proliferation of nonhuman narrators in contemporary fiction marks a genuine response to the posthumanist and new-materialist reorientation of the humanities, but its significance has been widely misconstrued when measured against the wrong standard. These narrators do not give voice to the nonhuman in the sense of transcribing an otherwise inaccessible experience, and the theoretical sophistication of the novels lies in their knowing refusal of that fantasy. Ishiguro's android, McEwan's synthetic human, Powers's communicating forest, and VanderMeer's unassimilable Area X each enact a different negotiation with the same intractable fact: human language and human narrative form remain the only instruments available, and they were built for the human. What the strongest of these

texts achieve is a calibrated anthropomorphism that makes the seams of projection visible, so that the reader feels at once the imaginative pull toward the nonhuman and the boundary that arrests it.

This relocation of value, from successful representation to the dramatised limit of representation, has consequences for how the genre should be read and theorised. It suggests that the nonhuman voice is most truthful when it is most reflexive, when it foregrounds rather than conceals its dependence on the human medium. It aligns the literary experiment with the ethical core of posthumanist thought, which asks not for the abolition of the human but for a chastened, relational humility before a world of distributed agencies that exceed human comprehension. And it offers narrative theory a productive case in which the categories of experientiality, focalization, and voice are stretched to their breaking points and thereby made newly visible. The nonhuman voice, in the end, tells us less about what it is to be a tree, a machine, or a transformed organism than about the shape and the edges of the human imagination that strains, generously and self-consciously, toward them. That strain, and the gap it discloses, is the achievement.

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