Drop the 'Proto-': Posthumanism and Prefiguration

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Abstract

This essay considers the term 'proto-posthumanisms' in the context of the dynamics of prefiguration. Acknowledging that posthumanism is a paradigm keyed to the anticipative, the speculative, the prophetic, the precessive, it looks at what some of the implications that follow from that might be. The main conclusions turn on questions of the event, originarity, and the (mis)recognition of the present and the future.

Keywords: protohumanism, posthumanism, transhumanism

There is one sense in which the 'proto-' in 'proto-posthumanism' is redundant. Posthumanism is a paradigm shaped by the anticipative. Its governing tense, even when it suppresses it or maintains a denial of this timescape, is the subjunctive. As a body of thought about a cultural condition – a (non/trans)human condition – projected in the present on the basis of tendencies and potentialities in their state of putative emergence, posthumanism reads what it is that might realistically or fantastically come about. Consequently, it is doubtful whether there has ever been a paradigm to which the speculative is so integral. To say that posthumanism deals in futures is a pun too far, but to say that posthumanism is one vast wager is not unjustified. This can make posthumanism seem tiresome. It can be held at bay by the readier plausibility: 'Get real!' This can seem a trenchant response whatever tone posthumanism takes on. And the spectrum of posthumanism's tones is broad indeed. It takes in fear, disquietude, sombreness, resignation, hope, augury, annunciation, excitability, and elation, to name just a few of the moods that it has countenanced. Occasionally however, its predictive value – for it has some, and not insubstantially – is vindicated by breakthroughs, discoveries, innovations, events. Its coefficient of credibility thereby increases. Where that happens, the sense of imminence lends urgency to the merely anticipative. The subjunctive can then seem like it could, *in fact*, 'get real' – or nearly so. That is where that other predictable counter – 'We've been here before; this is only like …' – might suspend itself.

The ascription to posthumanist rhetoric of futurological breathlessness can in certain circumstances be overtaken by suspicion that the new might really be breaking. For instance: there *is* life on Mars; or, there is *intelligent* life beyond the galaxy; or, there is *inscrutable* intelligence in the AIs around us; or, human unintelligence is about to bring the end of the world. Yet none of this could be thought of as surprising, if it came about. It would not be, quite, an *event*. There have been enough announcements in the 'proto' key for the human to have been amply primed for a posthuman condition.

There will be a stolidity to the posthuman even before evidence of the 'proto' – or its spectacle. It is there in the sober distinction made between posthumanism and

transhumanism. This can in the end come down to no more than the difference between the cautiously, or informedly, *engagé* stance about the future on the one hand, and on the other, the heralding, cheering perspective before the birthing of new worlds, new conditions. The twenty-first century's sophisticated strategies of blasé dispositions before the affordances of serially rapid change – this gift of a renewably protean present, ever brave – remain largely unsettled, reassured by '*plus ça change*' mutterings even in the context of their accreted distinctiveness. It will have been because what had been presented as 'proto-' – 'the shape of things to come' – is refigured in the outlines of tameable (or tamed) actuality. The digital present, virtual reality, synching AIs, automation's (re)makings, privacy erosion, climate change, the extinction of species, nuclear brinkmanship, economic collapse: big deal. Humanity *copes*. Not, perhaps, across the specificities of its situatedness, but in the collectivity of its resilient, empathy-averse, imagination-restraining collective, it takes the scenarios of posthumanism (and its restless subset, transhumanism) in its stride – in hope and in darkness. This in fact happens because of prolonged exposure to the proto-posthuman. Posthumanism's prefiguring analogues, in theory and practice, in critique and fiction, open onto whatever happens next. So that the overriding question turns on the nature of their precision. On the extent of their uncanny prescience.

Of the actuality of a posthuman condition we would not be able to say that it came up on the blind side of the world, not when awareness of its prefiguring had been subliminally or more availably present to apprehension – or apprehensiveness. Posthumanism, its rhetoric and its fictions, would have prepared us. There remains the real worry that 'the worst' – to use Derrida's eloquently simple designation, in his thoughts on autoimmunity and philosophy in a time of terror, for that which is unthinkably monstrous – cannot, by definition, have any prefiguring cast.[1] Which, in effect, only ups the ante. Attentiveness to what it would have been within the posthuman that was 'proto' (and how much of it couldn't be, if it is a name for the emergent?), tuned to the transformation of the subjunctive (or, indeed, the conditional) as it moves upon the present simple, the present perfect, the past simple, can then with hindsight *and* foresight *and* in sight of happening be recognised as an obligation. An obligation for readied critique. But before that, there is the obligation to realise that something in the present had been prefigured in the past, which is the easy part, and the obligation to realise that something in the present prefigures the future, which is the crazy part, open to all kinds of *faux* and *fous*, and therefore needful of tact and measure.

'Proto-': the very fact that this morpheme contains (in the double sense of comprehending and constraining) all the above is itself indicative of the responsibilities of thought before perceived urgencies within 'the time we live now'. If the prefix before the other prefix is redundant in the term 'proto-posthumanism', it is because posthumanism *is* that labour of thought. If it is *not* redundant, it is because its use foregrounds the nature of that labour: the play of recognition and precognition of trajectories past and prospective.

Tricky morpheme, then, this 'proto-'. A trickster prefix. Quite up to the implicativeness of 'post-' or 'ana-', clearly, and there is ample memory of where *that* led. Actually, and as it happens or happened, by transparent and inscrutable route, to posthumanism – *that* is where that tended.

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[1] See Jacques Derrida, 'Autoimmunity', in Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

And yet, not another 'post-', it could well be groaned. They keep multiplying, the nouns and adjectives starting with 'post-' that designate recent, present, impending times. And to place 'proto' before 'post' is to bring the precessive and the successive in intersected process. It is the incongruity inherent to this physics of time that explodes the simple tenses in the play of the complex tenses, where the obligation of the observer to demarcate 'This is happening', or, 'It is almost as if this is happening', or, 'This will have happened', as well as the continuities therein, makes any certainty on 'is', or 'was', or 'will be' the privilege retained by those who have conviction and intensity. For anyone unconverted to that status, studying the 'proto-' and its openness requires different relations to faith and fate.

Which means that proto-posthumanism as a discourse, state or condition seen to stand in the presentiment (even pre-sentiment) of itself reified requires a reflection on the nature of prefiguration. But what is prefiguration?

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With an operation as indefinite as prefiguration – surely, something that by its very nature does not offer itself to sharp, resolved definition – the dictionaries are remarkably definite. As they must be. Meaning is put upon events more sensed than occurring. This, after all, is the very character of prefiguration and its precognition.

Let us revisit the *OED*'s definition of 'prefigure'. 'To be an early indication or version of; to foreshadow,' goes the first part of the first of three definitions of the term. An early versioning, indicating whatever is/was to come, would already have more outline than a foreshadowing, one would think – not least because the *OED* defines foreshadow, in its noun form, as 'a shadow cast before an object; an indication or imperfect representation of something to come'. The *verb* – transitive – is then defined as, 'To serve as the shadow thrown before (an object); hence, to represent imperfectly beforehand, prefigure'. There we are, in the circularities of imperfect representation, where one defining attempt at giving meaning and form to the indefinable runs up and repeats another – and itself. 'To imagine beforehand' (as a number of other lexicons phrase their definition of 'prefigure') positions the seer-like to the fore.

To move on (which is, of course, the point with prefiguration). The second part of the first definition of 'prefigure' goes, 'to represent beforehand by a figure or type'. In parentheses, preceding this, is the telling abbreviation, '(Theol.)'. Prefiguration is after all rarely far from prophecy: from the annunciation of what will be coming about all the way through the intermediate states to the event that will have been knowable, that will have made itself so in its foreshadows. And if 'know' and its derivatives must be misnomers, there is always the resource of mysticism (which posthumanism, it could incidentally be said, is itself not averse to). All the religions of the Book represent the teleological through precessive figures or types that again co-articulate fate and faith. A number of the examples given by the *OED* for the usage of 'prefigure' in this first sense are accordingly informed by the theological, or at least by religious themes. For instance: 'She stands at the beginning of human time, prefigured by Eve,' is the last example provided, taken from Anita Weston's translation of Piero Boitani's *The Bible and Its Rewritings* (this is itself an intriguing title in any context discussing prefiguration). 'She', unspecified in the definition, is Susanna. This is the interesting passage immediately preceding the sentence quoted in the *OED*, here re-placed in its context:

> […] The *Ecclesia* is built up in successive historical stages, in a liturgical procession, a sequence, a litany, as if it were in a truly Roman concretion of different epochs and different orders. *This* is the economy of the 'Father'; *this* is Susanna. In purity, she is the female equivalent of Jacob's son, Joseph. She stands at the beginning of human time, prefigured by Eve.[2]

This sense of procession, of a sequenced concretion of different epochs and different orders upholding a divinely ordained economy of gradualist revelation, is the tidier analogue to the structure that shapes Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life', with its vision of the 'stream of people […]/ All hastening onward', where 'none seemed to know / Whither he went, or whence he came', where 'Old age & youth, manhood & infancy, / Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear'. The centrality of Shelley's poem to Paul de Man's reflections on figure and figuration would be relevant for this essay, were the focus here cast more fully on how questions of disfiguration merge with the problematic of prefiguration. It is also reminiscent of Baudrillard's take on the precession of simulacra. In these intertextual extensions, the common theme is the intimation of the imperfection of the representation, as bodied in the available. In other words, everything about prefiguration confirms the idea of it as deferred co-presence with the thing, being, event that would resolve prefiguration as itself, as the pre-cognised, substitutive incompletion of what will have fully come to pass. In all its constructions, prefiguration is knowable as such only after it has been vindicated by history. Without time's affordance to nominate prefiguration as a prescience proven by events, the operative process remains that of the guess or of prophecy. This raises further issues concerning prefiguration's knowingness and knowability in its own time and their relation to times forthcoming, about which more will be suggested in the last section below.

The second definition in the *OED* for 'prefigure' is 'to shape or form at the front'. There, temptingly, lies all the discourse on the beguilement of the avant-garde, all the imponderables governing who goes before whom in the vision afforded in Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'. The question is the recurrent one of who really precedes whom in the passage of filiation – Dante or Virgil, Plato or Socrates, the strong poets or their precursors. That can be passed over here, in view of the ampler discussion of that question in so many contexts in criticism or theory.

The third definition does however warrant pause. 'To imagine beforehand,' it reads, and adds: 'Now *literary*.' The examples of this literary use of 'prefigure' are taken from a pleasing range of sources, including Sterne ('My first sensations […] were far from being so flattering as I had prefigured them'); Tennyson ('There is no truer-hearted—ah, you seem / All he prefigured'); Howells ('He was not at all a fat priest, as I had prefigured him'); George Eliot ('She had prefigured to herself, even with exaggeration, the disgust of her friends, and she had even feared that Celia might be kept aloof from her'); and Muriel Spark ('At night I lay awake looking at the darkness, listening to the silence, prefiguring the future'). It's only surprising here that there is no Henry James, though the explanation would be that *his* work is all about the imprint of pre-conscious thought upon consciousness, without the word 'prefiguration' having to be invoked as such. Similarly, T. S. Eliot, and the too well-known lines: 'We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the *first time*.' Beyond these associations, however, lies the insight that there may be something specifically literary about the experience of

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[2] Piero Boitani, *The Bible and Its Rewritings*, trans. Anita Weston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 71.

prefiguration and its instigations of *déjá lu*, never mind *déjà vu*. Literature and religion, then: the two discourses where prefiguration is insistent, constitutive. They come together, as it happens, in Dante's pioneering use of *transumanar* in Canto XXXIII of the *Paradiso*, used there not in any sense to prefigure the technoscientific transcendence of the human associable with twentieth-century and twenty-first-century transhumanist idiom on Singularity (an example, therefore, of a precedence entirely unwitting in what it pre-echoes), but rather in the sense of transfigurative experience before divine presence. Here is an insight worth noting. Never mind prefiguration: transhumanism, posthumanism, even when they did not know themselves as such, were after transfiguration. It was always about leaving the human behind. In intent, if not chronology. The human *is* the proto.

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If the human is the proto – the imperfectly representing type – then posthumanism is the study of the desire of the human to be other than it is.

The desire suffers serial thwarting, as demonstrated in Elaine L. Graham's reflections in *Representations of the Post/Human* on the fictions driven by it. The acceded otherness is likely to still be imperfect, which is what shapes the irony in N. Katherine Hayles's title, *How We Became Posthuman*. Proto-posthumanisms, in this construction, amount to earlier manifestations of the desire: tales and tracts on how even before the affordances of the technoscientific dispensations of the present, the re-engineering of the human condition was felt to be pertinent and the consequences of its impertinence worth risking. There is so much that it is opportune to reread in that way, from creation myths through to Ovid, from all the narratives on Faustian pacts through to science fiction's 'last and first men' scenarios. It is what justifies scholarship like Graham's, or the essays in this collection of *Word and Text*, or the Genealogy of the Posthuman carried forward in the evolving project at criticalposthumanism.net.

In that sense, the suggestion that the 'proto' be dropped is a reminder of an ineluctable redundancy, perhaps futility, in posthumanism itself, as term and paradigm. Both 'proto' and 'posthumanism' are redundant: if not now then later, because their wager is that they will be exceeded by what will come to vindicate their pertinence, whereupon the imperfection of their representation grows immediately quaint, embarrassing, *out*. The temptation – and the critical instinct – is to read the temporality of this process and its desires against those theoretical contexts that orthodoxly replay the operations of the uncanny; of *Nachträglichkeit*; of the future anterior; of spectropoetics and its hauntings and hauntologies; of anagogy and anamnesis. Freud, Lyotard, Derrida recommend themselves easily. But there are other relevancies in any number of thinkers we might aggregate to the list of those thinking time – and the times – in the present and its imminence, from Sloterdijk to Stiegler and beyond.

Yet if posthumanism is not to be recuperable within the conditions and discourses that we have come to know, it must reassert its conviction that it has really started something. As in, something *else*. That it really is proto, without equation. That the nature of this proto is a little more unsettling than everything that posthumanism has come to be, or that posthumanism has in its sights. The difficulty is that the moment that 'proto' quality starts to be named as such, characterised and elaborated, then contrary devices and desires for its containments immediately arise. The investments in the misrecognising the proto-posthuman are considerable. And it is not as if the recognition were ever going to be easy, in any case, not least because prefiguration's vindication in its own time is, by definition, intractable to conjugation.

There is one aspect to proto, perhaps, that is not so easily put to rest. Outside those definitions that have to do with linguistics and the history of language(s), giving currency to terms like 'proto-Hattic', say, the insisted-upon extension of 'proto' in the *OED* specifies the prefix conferring the sense of 'earliest, original; at an early stage of development, primitive; incipient, potential'. Drop those senses that have to do with early stage of development, primitive, incipient, potential. Retain 'earli*est*, original' (emphasis added). This, against poststructuralism and its kindred discourses' suspicion of going back to any origin, of the recoverability of the 'earliest', is what posthumanism might need to bring to emphasis amid the surrounding pieties that urge the misguidedness of any such undertaking. If nothing else then, what posthumanism might engage is the deepest retrospective stance, rather than the deepest receptivity to *arrivants*. Posthumanism can thereby be as paleo-ontological as it is presentist and futurological. Drop the proto, then; there are other prefixes that probably matter more.

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Să renunțăm la „proto-”. Postumanismul și prefigurarea

Rezumat

Acest articol face considerații asupra termenului „proto-postumanisms" în contextul dinamicii prefigurării. Recunoscând că postumanismul este o paradigmă care are rolul de a anticipa, de a specula, de a face profeții, de a preceda, articolul menționează câteva dintre posibilele implicații a ceea ce poate urma. Principalele concluzii se centrează pe întrebări despre evenimentul, originea postumanismului și (ne)recunoașterea prezentului și a viitorului.