I can think of numerous examples from the past and present where speaking ‘in the name of the human’ is deeply questionable. But then again, I can think of plenty of situations where to speak in the name of the human seems politically and ethically necessary: people are still objectified, quantified, commodified, de-humanized, de-personalized, denied all agency and ‘human-ness’ – a term which I know I am appealing to, for the moment, by way of a ‘hunch’, to borrow the word used in David Gary Shaw’s essay to signal a similar intuition. To wax more parochial, about my own profession, speaking ‘in the name of the human’ could be the basis for resisting recurring governmental attempts to reduce education to skills, or for opposing the bureaucratic terminology of ‘learning outcomes’ as well as the management-speak of hitting ‘targets’. I don’t want impersonal bureaucratic processes to triumph over personal engagement with literary texts and the questions they pose. Nor do I want to end up teaching students how to write advertising copy. I want education to be ‘deep and wide.’ I want to encourage students to develop as ‘human beings’, and not just be cogs in the capitalist machine.

The somewhat contradictory sets of questions I ask myself about the above polemic, and the sets of questions I want to work through with the help of the essays in this collection, are as follows:

- Could I resist the objectifying and dehumanizing tendencies identified above ‘in the name of the posthuman’? What are the practical and political
advantages and disadvantages of the terms ‘humanism’ and ‘posthumanism’? Is speaking in ‘the name of the human’ an example of ‘species narcissism’ (Witmore) or an acknowledgement that some ‘human’ subjects have not yet had access to humanist discourses, let alone posthumanist ones?

- The above ‘instinctive’ appeal to the human seems conveniently to ignore the fact that humans can be inhuman, can impose inhuman systems upon each other. But is inhumanity the product, as one kind of Marxist might think, of a particular economic and social order, or is the inhuman, as some posthumanists would argue, integral to the human?

- If the latter is the case, and the human is hybrid, mutable, open to ongoing re-description and reconstruction, then at what point, if at all, might we want to (temporarily?) halt the process of re-description/reconstruction, for polemical, political and/or ethical purposes? If there is a ‘bad finitude’, in which the human is an homogenizing, singular and complacently used category, then, likewise, is there a ‘bad infinity’, whereby the human is imagined as a blank slate onto which virtually anything can be inscribed, or else arrogantly assumed to be a boundless Faustian condition, the endless re-description of which is also the product of academic over-specialization, reminiscent of the late medieval scholasticism against which (some) Renaissance humanists reacted?

- Finally, can the ‘complex unity’ which New Critics often found in literature help us to find a balance between the interminability and the terminability of the human (and ways of describing it)?

But first, let me revert to my opening polemic and say why I think that this collection upholds the (humanist? posthumanist?) principle that education be ‘deep and wide’.

‘Everyone was thinking small’ writes Terry Eagleton in *After Theory* (2003) of the postmodern cultural theorists of the 1980s (Eagleton, 2003, 45). Looking less far back in time, Jean Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow, in their introduction to *Marxist Shakespeares*, make the similar claim that ‘The postmodern critique of master narratives has spawned its own demon fry – forms of criticism that fetishize the local, the particular … at the expense of considering the “big picture”, or at least the bigger picture’ (Howard and Shershow, 2001, 3). Thanks to the editors of this volume, the contributors to it and those others working in the fields of humanist, ‘new humanist’ and posthumanist enquiry, such criticisms as Eagleton, Howard and Shershow make, should now be less likely. Whatever points of connection or disconnection exist between these old and new ‘isms’, and however internally differentiated they like any other ‘ism’ become, the principle upon which the essays collected here rests – and the principle upon which this timely new journal itself substantially rests – is a commitment to expansiveness. To put this in more philosophical terms: by eliciting ontological questions (or sometimes
anti-ontological perspectives, which is not the same as ignoring them altogether), from each and every one of their objects of enquiry, these essays return questions about the nature of existence (not exclusively reserved for human existence) to criticism and theory. Yes, the essays are specialized and no doubt know their ‘corner’ of the universe better than non-specialists do. And yes, as part of this specialization, the essays practice one or another form of historicism. But none of the essays is so thoroughly absorbed in the historical moment it examines or in its particular area of specialist enquiry as to preclude them from reaching towards some broad consideration of ‘meaning’, to include a sense of life’s (and, again, not just human life’s) purpose or purposelessness. Where there has been a tendency in the wake of cultural materialism to restrict the ‘meaning of meaning’ to the culturally and textually specific generation of meaning, these essays reanimate ‘meaning’ to elicit questions about who (we think) we are, why we are here and how the meanings, past and present, attached to human life, are challenged by humanity’s traditionally excluded ‘others’.

Clearly, though, there are difficult decisions to be made about what we might or should choose to ontologize (or alternatively to relegate as an object of ‘special’ ontological consideration). This collection sets before us a rich diversity of possibilities: animals (Boyle, Maisano, Steel); stone (Cohen); the dead (Bildhauer); cyborgs and machines (Evans, Glimp, Harris, Truitt, Turner); things (Glimp, Lightsey, Yates); the body (Blake, MacKendrick, Shaw); the individual (Masciandaro); waste (Morrison); disability (Singer); the Paleolithic (Smail). A narrowly defined anthropocentrism will no longer do, not only because it ignores, and has historically been at the expense of, other species, but also because it ignores the morphing of the human into its perceived others. One answer, then, to the question of which or whose ontology we seek to make visible might be that ‘more is better.’ The more we mix up the ontologies and attempt to re-describe one mode of existence in terms of another, the less parochial and the more open-ended and ‘democratic’ our posthumanism or ‘reconstructed humanism’ becomes: so humanness is extended to animals (Bildhauer, Maisano), to the extent that animals might in some respects be considered more human than humans; or, to invert the still-anthropocentric implications of this particular re-description, the weeping of animals unsettles our humanness because it is not assimilable to it (Steel). The other remains other, not as a ‘subhuman’ other which bolsters our sense of species-superiority, but as a challenge to a presumed omniscience.

Re-description, then, can challenge the complacency of some appeals to the human. And speaking not of the human but of the ‘isms’ which attempt to describe or question it, the re-description of humanism as posthumanism can also introduce a ‘good infinity.’ To re-describe humanism as ‘always already’ a posthumanism, on the basis that the human was always blurry not just around the edges but at its center, is to acknowledge something of the
complexity of the humanist tradition. Even or especially during the period (the Renaissance) most frequently (and perhaps mistakenly) associated with its coming-into-being, anthropocentrism variously signified:

- species-superiority – ‘erected wit’ – heavily tempered with a sense of humanity’s postlapsarian condition – its ‘infected will’ (Sidney, 1966, 25);
- the protean – ‘Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou ... art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer’ (Mirandola, 1965, 4);
- interiority – ‘I have that within that passeth show’ (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.85);
- individualism – ‘I'll ... stand/As if a man were author of himself/And knew no other kin’ (Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, 5.3.34–37);
- the civic impulse to shape collective life into the ‘good’, ‘fully human’ life by offering morally enlightened advice to princes and statesmen;
- an interest in the human (in all its diversity) as an end in itself rather than as a means to the end of a knowledge of God, with the result that sensuous realism partly displaces (religious) allegory;
- an insistence, related to this, that the basis of poetry’s ethical appeal is its capacity to animate, incarnate and produce ‘lively’ – sensuous – ‘knowledge’ of moral truths (Sidney, 1966, 32);
- an epistemology based on human rather than divine causation (Machiavelli).

To extract one of these humanisms as the definitive and dominant version would be a mistake. If the re-description of humanism as ‘posthumanism’ helps us to see that humanism’s inscription of the human never was monolithic, then it serves a useful purpose.

Posthumanism, then, re-describes a humanism that, in the words of Neil Badmington, ‘never manages to constitute itself’ because it is itself forever re-describing the human (Badmington, 2000, 9). We cannot leave the matter there, however, as among the above descriptions are ones that suggest limits to what humans can be. Admittedly, these limits are themselves variously described (fallen-ness, sensuousness, embodiment). And in some of the essays collected in this volume, which lean, with differing degrees of ‘stoop’, towards a description of the human in terms of finitude, limits are also diversely conceived: in terms of emotion and ‘the hunch ... that feelings are key to the essentially human’ (Shaw); the need for safety (Glimp); or the limits which the unintelligibility (to humans) of animal weeping places on the human will-to-knowledge (Steel). In one essay, albeit not explicitly conceptualized in terms of human limits, the conclusion that, ‘I must do something truly stupid. I will love’, can be understood as an ‘all-too-human’ attempt to find meaning and a place of (temporary?) rest amidst such dizzyingly perplexing questions as: ‘why am I me?’; ‘why
am I not you?’, ‘why am I not a cat?’ (Masciandaro). The end of Masciandaro’s essay reads like a variation on Descartes’ own infamous attempt to pare back human subjectivity to its essentials. It is not so much cogito ergo sum, but more ‘I love therefore I am’ or, more accurately, ‘I love, therefore we are’, which provides an end to an otherwise interminable discourse – ‘Discourse dies in the real presence of lovers’ eyes’ (Masciandaro) – even as, of course, the essay’s epilogue, which takes the form of a poem, is itself ‘discourse.’ However, it is a discourse – a form of sonnet, in fact – renowned for formal constraints which nevertheless permit a (limited) number of movements and counter-movements. A sonnet, that is, re-describes within limits. It is, in new critical parlance, a complex unity. It balances the interminable (the sonnet as response to, or continuation of, another sonnet), with the terminable (a sonnet ends, even if, as part of a sequence, another one shortly begins). To allegorize the sonnet for a moment, is this what literature in general is?

How much is too much? How little is too little? How many ways can the human be reconfigured, via one or another metaphor (the human as plant-like, rock-like, machine-like, animal-like … ), deployed as metaphors or else made concrete by the fast-changing culture we inhabit, before we reach a limit? It may well be, as Iain Chambers argues, that ‘Being in the world does not add up, it never arrives at the complete picture, the conclusive verdict. There is always something more that exceeds the frame we desire to impose’ (Chambers, 2001, 2), but this does not mean that human life is a boundless ocean of possibilities. For all the historical variability and indeterminacy surrounding the concept of the human, as well as the limitlessness of human abilities attested by certain forms of humanism and, now, posthumanism, there are arguably limits to what we can be. As Eagleton suggests in his own witty exploration of the meaning of life: the ‘material nature of my body’ entails that it ‘could not be part of the meaning of life that I should leap unaided thirty feet in the air three times a day’ (Eagleton, 2007, 133). The fact that it is possible to compile lists of generic human attributes and experiences suggests the existence of some sort of recognizable backdrop against which most human lives unfold. One such list is compiled by Eagleton: ‘Any meaningful life-plan which fails to accommodate the realities of kinship, sociality, sexuality, death, play, mourning, laughter, sickness, labor, communication, and so on is not going to get us very far’ (Eagleton, 2007, 133–134). The ‘and so on’ is the mark of an inevitable resistance to absolute closure. We could no doubt add to or elaborate upon Eagleton’s shorthand, but the process of elaboration, as I have argued elsewhere, is precisely what we might mean by ‘literature’ (Mousley, 2009).

What also interests me is the kind of language we choose to describe limits and limitlessness. They can, for instance, be described in broadly human/humanist terms, with limitlessness translating as ‘richness and complexity’, and limits or finality as primary or what I have elsewhere termed ‘near-universal’ human needs (Mousley, forthcoming). Masciandaro’s essay, for me, deploys
such a human/humanist vocabulary for love: love is simultaneously written as complex – ‘Are they in love or is love in them/Why, how, where, when this fact, this force, feeling, or form grows’, and primary – ‘The taken-for-granted gravity of being, love/Joins impossibility’ (Masciandaro). The use of a ‘depth’ metaphor to describe love, as an ‘innermost’ feeling, therefore seems appropriate. David Glimp’s claim that ‘posthumanism is a humanism – revised and retooled, to be sure, but a humanism nonetheless’ sounds right to me, when posthumanism maintains, as Glimp himself maintains and likewise Masciandaro, a terminology to describe limits and limitlessness with broadly existential and ontological resonance.

Posthumanism, however, can also be an antihumanism which rehearses, reworks and extends some of the antihumanist perspectives of the 1970s and 1980s. At its most extreme, posthumanism-as-antihumanism altogether eschews human/humanist vocabulary and operates a process of what might be called ‘reverse colonization.’ In place of an anthropocentrism that is taken to be solipsistic and colonizing of the non-human world, the non-human or ‘inhuman’ world colonizes the human realm, rewriting it in its image. Taking its cue as well as its metaphors from contemporary technological developments, posthumanism in this guise ‘refuses the ontological and temporal partitions which so often divide human and machine’ (Harris). Accordingly, love, in Harris’ essay on the figure of the ‘mammet’ in English Renaissance drama, is taken to be more ‘inhuman’ than ‘human’, more an impersonal mechanism than an end-point in an angst-ridden search for human/humanized identity and meaning. There is a language of limits and limitlessness built around love in Harris’ essay, but metaphors that lend a sense of depth, gravitas, struggle and wonder to a verb – ‘to love’ – thereby inscribed as human, are conspicuous by their absence. Instead of human subjects being firmly differentiated from objects, Harris argues that in the case of Shakespeare’s Juliet, ‘the object and the subject, the mechanical and the human, the compulsive and the agentic’ slide into one another.

A similar process of reverse colonization is also operated in Julian Yates’ essay. The inhuman metaphor which Yates chooses to describe the posthuman condition is a constantly in-use telephone line. Against the – overly limiting – concept of the human as solipsistically ‘self-identical’, the posthuman is ‘a call ... that comes in on all frequencies, and ... overwhels or overwrites existing codes.’ ‘By connecting calls that “the human” once simply blocked’, Yates continues, ‘the “post-human” floods the switchboard, threatening paralysis, extinction, or terminal overload.’ For Yates, the positive flipside to this threatening infinity is posthumanism’s dynamism, but as with Harris’ essay, the dynamism is the dynamism of a machine that almost-but-never-quite converts the ‘call’ for human recognition from the inhuman or not-yet-humanized into the human. ‘The call’, writes Yates, ‘doesn’t quite go through. There’s a fault on the line.’ Objects don’t get to become ‘full’ subjects. At the
same time, the subjectivity of subjects is itself discountenanced by calls from beyond the human. The ‘colonization’ of the non-human by the (self-identical) human is therefore obstructed. Although there is some agency-filled use of ‘we’ in Yates’ essay, as well as an appeal to animate life – ‘human life ... becomes the zone for other entities to manifest or to be judged as manifesting in ways we will term “alive”, “lively” or “alife”’ (Yates) – the machine metaphor is clearly intended to subvert anthropocentric language. Michael Witmore’s essay similarly resists anthropocentrism, not through its use of machine-metaphors, but from the perspective of language in general and how language has tended to be anthropocentrically theorized in recent years. In brief, against the ‘species narcissism’ implied by continental theories of language that emphasize the mediated (by humans) nature of reality, Witmore argues for the priority of extra-linguistic realities which impose a limit on their absorption into the human world.

What, then, should we make of posthumanism’s ‘reverse colonization’, as I’ve termed it? There are three differently slanted points that I think are worth sketching out here for possible future discussion.

The first is that the rewriting of the human in terms of the inhuman offers a useful corrective to human pretensions. We might like to think we are ‘deep and complex’, and attach portentous ontological meaning to human life, but ‘reverse colonization’ functions in the way that comedy can sometimes function, to deflate our ontological pretensions. Just as humor, as Simon Critchley suggests, obliges us to acknowledge our ‘laughable inauthenticity’ (Critchley, 2002, 102), so the reverse colonization which substitutes subjects for objects, performs an irreverent inversion that robs the human of its gravitas.

The analogy with comedy is also partly intended to rob posthumanism-as-antihumanism of its claim to authenticity and absoluteness, as comedy is but one, albeit important, genre among genres. This brings me to my second point. Posthumanists, of all hues and for often sound reasons, are keen to disrupt neat, linear, chronological description. The posthumanist mantra – that we were never not posthuman (meaning fluid, mutable, porous) – is, as I have already suggested, a useful antidote to the perceived singularity of humanist understandings of the human. However, when posthumanism-as-antihumanism backwardly projects its mechanistic view of humans, the difficult issue of the relationship between historical causation and universality arises. How far back in time do we want to locate the human-as-inhuman, the human-as-machine, the subject-as-object? It might be the case that human subjects have always had the capacity to objectify themselves and others, but to universalize this runs the risk of underplaying particular instances, as well as particularly intense manifestations of, objectification. From the Marxist perspective which I invoked at the beginning of my reflections, objectification and de-humanization are products of a particular social and economic order with which posthumanism-as-antihumanism might be seen as complicit.
So: when and what do/should we choose to universalize/ontologize? When and what do/should we choose to historicize?

A third, related point, has to do with the perception of ‘threat’, with what we see as threatening the world we inhabit and share with other species. Posthumanism-as-antihumanism tends to see humanism as the threat on account of its perceived solipsism (Yates), oppressive homogeneity (Worthen), and ‘species narcissism’ (Witmore). Meanwhile, humanists, reconstructed or otherwise, tend to see anti-humanism (or posthumanism-as-antihumanism) as threatening on account of its perceived complicity with those dehumanizing technological and technocratic features of a disenchanted modernity. It seems to me that there is no way of settling this issue on a purely intellectual level. Equally persuasive arguments might be advanced for either perspective. For me, the question has to be settled by deciding what the current threats are and how best, if only modestly and with limited effect, to ‘make a difference.’ My own decision, for what it’s worth, is based on the perception that modernity has always and everywhere placed the human under threat, and that literature offers a counter-discourse to that threatened erasure, by engaging us in ever-deepening (but contained) conversations about what it is to be ‘human.’ However unsettling of ourselves and our notions of humanness this engagement becomes, the terms of the conversation are themselves nearly always affective, and therefore, at some rudimentary level, human (see Mousley, 2007, forthcoming). Literature’s ‘affectively charged sensuousness’ (Altieri, 2007, 72) draws us into ontological questions, ‘animates’ them, gives them ‘life’, even as the question of the meaning of ‘life’ may be impossible to answer.

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