Posthuman Pages, Human Questions:
A Review of Joseph Tabbi's
The Cambridge Introduction To Literary Posthumanism (2024)

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Joseph Tabbi's *The Cambridge Introduction to Literary Posthumanism* offers a timely and comprehensive overview of how posthumanist thought intersects with literary studies. Tabbi, a seasoned scholar of experimental literature and digital media, here synthesises a broad range of texts and theories to chart a "through-line" of literary posthumanism from the nineteenth century to the digital age. The result is a scholarly, conceptually rich introduction that not only defines key terms and debates but also demonstrates what literary posthumanism offers to the humanities. This review considers how Tabbi's account of literary posthumanism brings together historical range and theoretical insights, and what this combination offers to ongoing discussions in the humanities.

Tabbi's central premise is that posthumanism in literature is "not just another period" or a transient genre trend, but a critical orientation that reconfigures how we read and understand texts (1). From the outset, he distinguishes critical posthumanism from simplistic notions of the "posthuman" as a futuristic condition. In the introduction, Tabbi aligns literary posthumanism with the longstanding impulse of literary theory to defamiliarise our understanding of the world. He argues that both literary theory and posthumanist thought are marked by "a *defamiliarizing* tendency" (4, emphasis in original) rather than an extension of human dominance or technocratic power. He mentions that literary posthumanism does not seek to enhance human agency but instead "studies and deflects" the entrenched "[p]ower relations […] that have historically situated the human above other life forms" (4). By decentring the human subject, literature can expose and challenge the hierarchy that places humans at the apex of existence. This stance sets the tone for the book's critical project: examining how literature invites us to know the world differently, beyond the familiar human-centred frameworks.

One of the book's strengths is its historical and textual breadth. Tabbi constructs a narrative from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to contemporary digital literature, illustrating that posthumanist concerns have been present in literary imagination for over two centuries. Chapter 2, for example, pairs Shelley's classic novel with Shelley Jackson's hypertext novella *Patchwork Girl* (1995), dubbing Jackson's work a "postmodern Prometheus," as Jackson herself is an author who stitches together fragments of text into a living interactive whole in a deliberate analogy to Victor's own actions in *Frankenstein*. Through close reading, Tabbi shows how these texts engage with questions of creation, identity, and the boundaries of the human. Notably, he highlights the role of gender and creativity: it is "precisely this acceptance, and celebration, of female imagination that distinguishes a literary posthumanism; which is to say: an aesthetic that patiently explores rather than transcends powers that inhere in nature – powers, and unforeseen assemblages that we humans would do well to let be" (45). In Shelley's and Jackson's respective works, female authorship envisions forms of life and storytelling that resist the masculine drive to control or "transcend" nature (56). This insight illustrates Tabbi's broader point that literary posthumanism often emerges through acts of refusal or re-imagination within the humanist tradition. Throughout the book, he identifies such "humanist refusals" (2) in literature, from Melville's Bartleby, whose famous refrain "I would prefer not to" (qtd. in 91) subverts the imperatives of a humanist work ethic, to Thomas Pynchon's playful surrogates that evade the cult of authorial genius. By including modern and contemporary writers like William Gibson, Tom McCarthy, Colson Whitehead, Jeanette Winterson, and Claire-Louise Bennett, Tabbi demonstrates how narrative experiments and evasions continue to unsettle human-centred perspectives in twenty-first-century fiction. These diverse examples support his argument that literary posthumanism is not confined to science fiction tropes but permeates various genres and modes of writing, wherever authors interrogate the limits of human identity and knowledge.

Crucially, Tabbi frames literary posthumanism as a response to the technological and intellectual conditions of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In Chapter 1, "Beyond the Two Cultures?", he revisits C. P. Snow's famous divide between the sciences and the humanities in the "Two Cultures" debate (24–26), suggesting that posthumanism can bridge this gap. He explores the growing tension (and potential dialogue) between technoscientific visions of the posthuman and critical-humanistic posthumanist approaches that extend posthumanist thought into ecological and ethical fields. On one side are futurist or transhumanist narratives of radical enhancement and "evental change" (e.g. the emergence of an AI-powered posthuman species); on the other side are the more reflective critiques that imagine a "postanthropocentric subjectivity of beings still human" (Boldizsár Simon qtd. in 14).

Tabbi's discussion clearly differentiates transhumanism's tendency to extend human-centric narratives from posthumanism's effort to rethink our place among nonhuman agents. For instance, in Chapter 3, he observes that the "transhuman" perspective often reinforces existing frameworks: "extending, strengthening, and repurposing human (and humanist) concepts" – without opening new ways to imagine community or agency beyond the human (49). By contrast, the posthumanist literary outlook seeks to imagine genuinely new relationships and "reimagined" communities that include technological, animal, or ecological others. Tabbi supports this point by citing contemporary novelist Tom McCarthy's concern that ubiquitous data and algorithms are forcing writers "to rethink their whole role and function, to remap their entire universe" (qtd. in 48). Such examples underscore the book's argument that literature must adapt in an age when nonhuman systems (from Big Data networks to AI) increasingly shape narratives. Tabbi coins the term "postperiodization" (48) to argue that, unlike earlier literary movements, posthumanism is not confined to a historical period with clear boundaries. Instead, it arises in tandem with exponential changes in media and technology that challenge the very notion of discrete literary eras. The analysis spans from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the epic tradition to the contemporary Era of AI, discussed in Chapter 7, implying that posthuman impulses can be traced in many epochs but have taken on new urgency today.

In Chapter 2, Tabbi emphasises materiality and embodiment: he highlights how literature can make abstract networks palpable or give voice to nonhuman processes. His analysis of Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, for instance, celebrates the "multiplicity of the feminine" and the physical patchwork of textual bodies (45), aligning with feminist new materialist critiques of any singular, disembodied "god's eye" perspective. This theoretical layering means that not only does the book survey literary examples but also offers conceptual tools for scholars. Tabbi's commentary often doubles as a guide to using posthumanist theory in practical literary interpretation.

In the fourth chapter, "Posthuman Sublime," Tabbi revisits the aesthetic category of the sublime, the experience of awe and terror at forces beyond human comprehension, and reinterprets it through a posthuman lens. By drawing on ancient authors like Longinus and Sappho, alongside modern theorists, like Pieter Vermeulen, Tabbi suggests a continuity between classical attempts to articulate the inhuman or overwhelming and contemporary efforts to grapple with nonhuman agency. Vermeulen mentions that the experience of terror is compensated by the realisation that the human capacity has not been overwhelmed, thus serving as a "tremendous ego booster" that "triumphantly reaffirm[s] the human" (62), which refers to "posthuman affects" to move beyond this ego-affirming structure. This long view enriches literary posthumanism by rooting it in familiar aesthetic traditions even as it transforms them.

In addition to its theoretical breadth, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literary Posthumanism* engages with the rapidly evolving digital and media landscape, which is a crucial aspect of posthumanist literature. Tabbi's background in electronic literature is evident in the chapters devoted to born-digital fiction and the "cognitive turn." He devotes an interlude to N. Katherine Hayles's work, acknowledging her influential role in bridging literature, technology, and cognitive science. In the later chapters, the book discusses digital poetry, hypertext fiction, and even the implications of artificial intelligence for narrative (Chapter 7, "Posthuman Epic in the Era of AI"). By examining electronic literature and AI narratives, Tabbi extends literary posthumanism beyond print culture, suggesting that the "literary" itself is being redefined in the age of algorithms and platforms. The epilogue, "Platform (Post?) Pandemic," brings the discussion up to the present moment, considering how the COVID-19 pandemic and our reliance on digital platforms might accelerate posthumanist cultural shifts.

While surveying literary works, Tabbi engages deeply with posthumanist theory, making the book especially valuable for scholars. Readers will find succinct introductions to major thinkers such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, among others. Rather than treating theory as an abstract background, Tabbi weaves these ideas into his literary readings. For example, he invokes Hayles's concept of distributed cognition and the blurring of human-machine boundaries to frame how posthumanism is "not a historical period" but a "field of interactions" across biological, technical, and textual realms (4). He also follows Wolfe in insisting on a rigorously critical posthumanism that rejects any simple human–machine hybrid narrative. By grounding his analysis in such theoretical perspectives, Tabbi demonstrates a thorough command of posthumanist discourse and brings clarity to its often diffuse debates. Notably, he distinguishes critical posthumanism from transhumanism (or naive celebratory posthumanism) at every turn; a clarification that is crucial for literary scholars who might be new to these terms. This conceptual precision is one of the book's key contributions: it delineates the stakes of posthumanist thought for literature, ensuring that readers understand posthumanism as a critical reorientation of humanism rather than a mere speculative theme about robots or cyborgs. Another significant contribution is Tabbi's integration of new materialist and ecological insights into literary analysis. Few introductions manage to incorporate such contemporary context, and this inclusion underscores the relevance of Tabbi's insights: he shows that literary posthumanism is not an esoteric theory but a framework for understanding literature's role, particularly for scholars and students in literary and cultural studies, posthumanist studies and digital humanities who are interested in tracing how the concept of the posthuman shapes both narrative form and intellectual discourse.