

# The Rise of the Post-humanist Criticism in the Posthuman Era

Wang Ning & Guo Libin

**Abstract:** It is true that a posthuman era has already arrived. In the past, the status of humanity as the “primate of everything” and the “elite of the universe” was severely challenged and resisted by various postmodern trends. Especially the deconstruction of anthropocentrism by ecocriticism, the challenge posed by animal studies to the power and role of human domination, and the attacks launched by various viruses on humans have threatened human survival and evolution. The application and popularization of artificial intelligence or AI have further marginalized humans and even made a large number of people have lost their jobs. In the field of humanities, humanism has also evolved into a sort of “posthumanism,” which challenges and deconstructs the myth of overemphasizing human status and role, causing humans to be pulled back to their original state: a species of all things on the earth. Post-humanist criticism is a literary critical trend that contradicts the development of humanist criticism to the extreme. In terms of time, it has come after humanist criticism, and in terms of content, it challenges the anthropocentric consciousness of humanist criticism on the one hand, and on the other hand, it can hardly separate itself from it, maintaining continuity with it to a certain extent. The rise of Post-humanist criticism has a new direction to literary and cultural criticism in the post-theoretical era.

**Keywords:** posthuman era; anthropocentrism; humanist criticism; Post-humanist criticism; artificial intelligence

**Authors:** Wang Ning is Distinguished University Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences at Shanghai Jiao Tong University and a foreign member of Academia Europaea. His main areas include modern and contemporary Western literary theory, comparative and world literature and cultural studies (Email: wangn22@sjtu.edu.cn). Guo Libin is a Ph.D. student in Chinese and Comparative Literature at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. Her main areas include ecocriticism and American literature studies (Email: a1552371682@sjtu.edu.cn).

**标题：**后人类时代的后人文主义批评的崛起

**内容摘要：**后人类时代已经确实到来了。人类以往的所谓“万物的灵长”和“宇

宙的精英”地位受到各种后现代思潮的挑战和抵制。尤其是生态批评对人类中心主义的消解、动物研究对人类“君临一切”的力量和作用的挑战以及各种病毒对人类发起的攻击已经使得人类的生存和繁衍受到威胁。而人工智能的应用和普及更是使得一大批人被放逐到社会的边缘甚至失去自己的工作。在人文学术领域，人文主义也已演变成一种“后人文主义”，随之而来的就是文学批评界崛起的后人文主义批评。后人文主义挑战并打破了以往过分推崇人的地位和作用的神话，使得人再度被拉回到其原初的状态：世间万物中的一个物种。后人文主义批评是人文主义批评发展到极致后的一种与之逆向相悖的文学和文化批评，在时间上它后于人文主义批评，在内容上它一方面挑战了人文主义批评的人类中心主义意识，另一方面又与之难以割舍，因而在一定程度上维持了与它的连续性。后人文主义批评的崛起给后理论时代的文学和文化批评理论增添了一个新的方向。

**关键词：**后人类时代；人类中心主义；人文主义批评；后人文主义批评；人工智能

**作者简介：**王宁，上海交通大学人文社会科学资深教授，欧洲科学院外籍院士，主要从事现当代西方文学理论、比较文学与世界文学和文化研究；郭丽斌，上海交通大学人文学院博士研究生，主要从事生态批评和美国文学研究。

In today's international and domestic academic circles, discussing the issue of posthuman and posthumanism has become a critical fashion, which is largely related to the cultural situation since literary and cultural theory has entered the post-theoretical era, as well as the deconstruction of the essentialist thinking patterns by various postmodern theoretical trends and the rapid development of high technology leading to the omnipresence and omnipotence of artificial intelligence. Obviously, the rise of post-humanism is a rebellious force against the development of the preceding humanistic tradition to its extreme, but at the same time, it has not completely abandoned the spirit and essence of humanism. As for literary theory and criticism, we all know that there has always been a long-standing humanistic tradition throughout the history of literary theory and criticism in both China and the West. Even amidst the prevalence of various postmodern criticisms, humanistic criticism has not totally disappeared, and it still plays its due role and function in a limited space.<sup>1</sup> The writing of this essay attempts to discuss the current post-

1 In this regard, one can particularly refer to the writings of two American critics: Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004; Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. Although both of these public intellectuals were once influenced by deconstruction, they still adhere to a humanistic stance in their critical writings, to some extent following the humanistic tradition in Anglo-American literary criticism.

human condition and the rise of Post-humanist criticism in this era from these two dimensions.

### **The Advent of the Posthuman Era?**

Describing the characteristics of the era we are currently in, people often use different terms or theoretical concepts to express them, such as the “postmodern” era, the “globalization era,” and the recently frequently used “posthuman era.” If the peak of the postmodern era has basically become history with the “decline of postmodernism” (Wang, *After Postmodernism* viii) in the West, then the era of globalization has also had a history of several decades, in which various “anti-globalization” and “de-globalization” noises continue to emerge, and even some people use the term “post-globalization” era. Although the era of globalization is far from over, the role of its leaders has changed. In the new wave of globalization, China’s leading role has been widely recognized and is exerting increasingly wide influence in all aspects. And the notion of the posthuman era is still in its infancy, because indeed, the posthuman era has just come. So where are the main characteristics of its era reflected?

Undoubtedly, as a living condition in the process of human development and evolution, posthuman has fundamentally changed the role and value of humanity. In the era of high humanism, the status of humanity as the “primate of everything” and the “elite of the universe” has been challenged and resisted by various postmodern theories that take deconstruction as their responsibility. Especially the deconstruction of anthropocentrism by ecocriticism, the challenge of animal studies to the power and role of human dominance, and the attacks launched by various viruses in nature on human health have directly threatened human survival and reproduction. In the high-tech era, the application and popularization of AI have led to a large number of people who once felt proud of their work being exiled to the margins or even losing their jobs. The main focus of this essay is on the impact of the popularity of AI on the human condition and the consequences it brings to humanities and academic research. Indeed, in the field of humanities in which we are committed to teaching and research, humanism, which used to dominate modern thinking and culture, has evolved into a form of “posthumanism,” followed by the rise of Post-humanist criticism in the literary critical community. Posthumanism challenges and breaks the myth of overemphasizing the role of humans, pulling them back to their original state: a species of all things in the world. Especially when humans invent various advanced facilities and equipment, some of their own functions are thus replaced to varying degrees. Sometimes, when humans invent and

create advanced facilities, the result is that even humans themselves cannot control and manage them. This situation may become more and more common in the future. How will humanity respond to this situation? Indeed, the previously capitalized “Man” has now evolved into a sort of posthuman. It cannot be denied that traditional humanists hold a stance of resistance towards the advent of the posthuman era, and fundamentally reject the deconstructive strategies of Post-humanist criticism. This is not difficult to understand.

However, the process of history is precisely something we cannot grasp or even resist. Various subjective and objective factors force us to admit that we have indeed entered a posthuman era, in which the status of humans has sharply declined and they are on a roughly equal footing with other species on Earth. Many of their unique roles have gradually been replaced by technology and AI. The emergence of robots has replaced various functions of humans: the birth of robots has led to some jobs previously done by humans being replaced by these robots. The use and promotion of drones have reduced unnecessary costs for transporting goods and minimized human sacrifice on the battlefield. Western scholar Hayles foresaw the intervention of machines on humans earlier and described this posthuman condition very clearly:

The important intervention comes not when you try to determine which is the man, the woman, or the machine. Rather, the important intervention comes much earlier, when the test puts you into a cybernetic circuit that splices your will, desire, and perception into a distributed cognitive system in which represented bodies are joined with enacted bodies through mutating and flexible machine inter faces. As you gaze at the flickering signifiers scrolling down the computer screens, no matter what identifications you assign to the embodied entities that you cannot see, you have already become posthuman. (*How We Became Posthuman* xiv)

It can be seen that humans have unknowingly arrived before they are fully aware of this situation. In literary creation, there have also emerged some science fiction works that depict the various consequences of high technology on human survival. Ecocriticism, animal studies, and science fiction criticism, which aim to deconstruct anthropocentrism, have also emerged in literary criticism. All of these have laid the foundation for the rise of a new Post-humanist criticism. This essay aims to analyze the impact of Post-humanist criticism on traditional humanist criticism from a dialectical perspective, as well as its own reasons and limitations. The authors

believe that while criticizing anthropocentrism, we should also prevent ourselves from moving towards the other extreme: geo-centrism, eco-centrism, techno-centrism, and so on. On the other hand, we should see that Post-humanist criticism does not completely exclude the role of human beings, but rather a backlash against the past overemphasis on human-centered consciousness. Therefore, in Post-humanist criticism, humanism should still have a proper place.

Undoubtedly, in the vigorous development of high-tech, humans have invented various advanced machines and facilities in order to reduce their own labor intensity and heavy burden, including unmanned machine equipment and AI facilities. This indeed reduces the intensity of human labor and the long-term burden of life and work, greatly improving the quality of human life. But the emergence of these advanced facilities has also led to the appearance of other phenomena: machines replacing manual labor, human-machine integration, and human-machine coexistence. Even some people cannot live without mechanical facilities. The emergence of all these phenomena greatly diminishes the role and value of human beings. For us humanities scholars, teaching, writing, and publishing may not work without operating computers in the future, and without using smartphones, it will be much more difficult to move forward. As Hayles said, “print-based scholars would become increasingly marginalized, unable to communicate not only with Digital Humanities colleagues but also with researchers in the social sciences and sciences, who routinely use digital media have developed a wide range of skills to work with them” (*How We Think* 6-7). This indeed makes those traditional old humanities scholars feel sad. People cannot help but ask, in the rapidly changing posthuman era of science and technology, what role can those old literati who only know how to write and play? If we carefully consider and dialectically analyze these phenomena, it will not be difficult to find that these three situations are also the new stages of the development and evolution of the relationship between humans and machines in the posthuman era, namely the three inevitable stages of development.

The first stage is characterized by machines replacing humans. Due to the invention of a large number of mechanization and automation facilities, machines have replaced manual labor in many jobs. On the one hand, this has liberated people from heavy and tedious labor, but on the other hand, it has led to an excess of manual labor. When we go to the bank branch today to handle the transfer or remittance business, the staff do not directly handle the business for us, but guide us on how to use the machine to complete the transfer and remittance business. This certainly saves labor and complexity, but the consequence is that a large amount of work is operated by machines or AI, so these branches no longer recruit

new employees after the retirement of elderly working staffs. The opening of mobile banking has further reduced the number of people going to bank branches for business. With the retirement of elderly employees who are not familiar with machine operation programs, banks no longer need to hire a large number of staff to work at branches, which has led to the closure or merger of some redundant branches with other branches. Similarly, the production and dissemination of knowledge are no exception. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, foreign language majors in China's universities were once a desirable field for young students: the popular idea of "learning math, physics, and chemistry well, and traveling the world without fear" evolved into "learning a foreign language well, making it more convenient to go global." For young students who dream of studying abroad in Western countries, especially the United States, they were willing to pay expensive tuition fees and attend various English training courses to strengthen their English skills in order to achieve their dreams. Next, they took TOEFL and GRE exams and finally went to American universities as they wished. Wang, one of the present authors of this essay, also had a background in English major, and his discipline has had glorious moments. He has also excelled in the international academic community with his English writings and papers published in authoritative international academic journals, and been invited to give lectures at top universities around the world.

Today, as universities focus on research achievements and paper publishing, his peers who used to be proud of their discipline either retire at the age of 60 or voluntarily give up the opportunity to be hired due to the delay in being promoted to a doctoral supervisor. But he is still hired as a guest or part-time professor by several famous universities at home and abroad. In the past, some of his colleagues relied heavily on translating literary works, but now with the popularity and application of machine translation and AI translation, many of their jobs can be completely replaced by machine and AI translation, so their role and value are no longer valued. And Wang is still invited by several publishing houses and journals to revise the initial drafts of translations done by machines or AI. Of course, while he has to admire the language of AI in the process of proofreading machine or AI translated translations, there are also many misunderstandings and mistranslations. And his task is to correct some of the errors and polish the translations done by AI, especially to re-translate the unique concepts in Chinese culture and literature that are difficult for AI translation to recognize. Of course, it cannot be denied that with the rapid development of generative AI based on big language models, there are fewer and fewer areas that he can modify. However, even at this stage, machines

and AI cannot completely replace the work of human translators.

The second stage is that of human-machine integration, which may last for a considerable period of time. At this stage, although the phenomenon of human-machine confrontation brought about by the replacement of human labor by machines gradually disappears, people have found that machines not only have the side of replacing human labor, but also have another positive aspect: they can make up for the shortcomings of human labor, enabling human-machine cooperation to reach a state of integration and cooperation, and the two work together to complete complicated work. In this regard, machines or AI have not completely replaced high-level human work, but have acted as assistants and helpers to these humans, helping them efficiently and accurately complete their tasks in a satisfactory way. In addition, machines can also play a role in assisting medical care, helping patients recover their health as soon as possible or making people's lives more convenient. When a person is physically disabled or has heart problems, machine facilities can enter the human body to help restore normal activities and even save lives. In terms of our writing and translation, AI can also play a significant role: when we need a speech, as long as we tell the AI the general content and keywords, it will provide a roughly usable speech in a short period of time, and we only need to supplement necessary data and modify the text to read it out at the meeting. As mentioned earlier, in terms of translation, ordinary documents can be easily translated by machines or AI. However, although the translation produced by machines or AI is smooth and authentic, it is inevitable that there will be some inaccuracies and errors. Therefore, it is necessary for higher-level human translators to review and modify the translation, correct any inaccuracies or errors, and make it as perfect as possible so as to meet our requirements.

The third stage of posthuman era is that of human-machine coexistence. In this stage, when machines or AI have developed to a very mature level, they not only alleviate the heavy physical labor that has long plagued humans, but also reduce the tedious mental labor. But a direct consequence of this is that some of the work that originally required manual labor is now done by machines or AI, and these people's jobs are completely replaced by machines or AI. They have to lose their jobs, which will lead to social instability and other ethical problems. Of course, we have also noticed another unfavorable phenomenon caused by excessive reliance on machines or AI: with the intervention of AI, human intelligence and manual dexterity will gradually decline. For example, some phenomena that appear before our eyes are truly astonishing: the car driver does not even know the way without the navigation system. College students who are accustomed to writing on computers often write



very poorly, and even make many spelling and grammatical mistakes in their writing. Some people find it difficult to move without the assistance of AI, and even struggle to take care of their basic needs, and so on. It cannot be denied that human labor can compensate for some of the shortcomings and deficiencies of machines, especially those that require high intelligence and abilities in manual work. Even if AI cannot replace it now, in the future, when it develops to a very high level, human intelligence and abilities will also develop accordingly. Therefore, coexistence and complementarity between humans and machines should be an ideal situation. Even in today's posthuman era, this situation will persist for a long time. So we don't have to worry about whether the role of humans will be completely lost. Because even the most advanced machines and large capacity AI facilities are invented and created by humans, and their control and manipulation are still human, even though humans no longer necessarily dominate and mobilize everything as they used to. Humans will continue to coexist with machines and AI for a considerable period of time, and be in an interactive and complementary state with the latter.

Of course, Hayles also proposed other characteristics of posthumans from different perspectives. Regarding these characteristics, she asked,

What is the posthuman? [...] First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition [...] Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. (*How We Became Posthuman* 2-3)

Then she concluded that in the posthuman era, "there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (*How We Became Posthuman* 3). Undoubtedly, due to the aforementioned characteristics, it is not difficult to see that in the posthuman era, although the status and role of humans are subject to certain limitations, their role is still indispensable, at least in terms of value ethics and emotional communication, which cannot be



replaced by AI. In addition, some mental labor that requires complex thinking cannot be completely replaced by machines and AI. Even the development and updates of AI still require human control and manipulation. In this way, we must not lose confidence in the future of humanity, but rather face the challenges of AI and continuously improve our thinking and innovation abilities, and guide AI towards better serving humanity.

### **A Critical Reflection on the Historical Role of Humanism**

We have above briefly described the advent of the posthuman era and the challenges and demotions faced by the status and role of people in such an era. In this section, we shall first review the historical role of humanism and its current situation, and then discuss the rise of Post-humanist criticism and its opposition to traditional humanist criticism. Although we can say that the term humanism was introduced from the West, it has always been present throughout China's thousands of years of intellectual and cultural history. We can even say that Confucius was the earliest humanist or humanistic educator in ancient China. Today, when we review the traditional Confucianism in the process of building Chinese-style modernization, it is not difficult to find that, in addition to its contempt for women, Confucianism also has many correct and desirable aspects. It can be said that there are some elements of Confucianism in the Sinicized Marxist doctrine, but its use in the construction of Chinese-style modernization after further activation and transformation in contemporary times shows its characteristics of the times and the common values of all mankind. The main purpose of Confucianism is benevolence and righteousness, which means that the benevolent love others. This characteristic is even reflected in Confucius' governance of the country with righteousness, benevolence, and filial piety, and active participation in secular affairs. Later disciples of Confucius developed and summarized Confucius' teachings as Confucianism, and regarded Confucius as their ancestor. Confucianism, with Confucius as its founder, places great emphasis on self-cultivation, also known as "cultivating oneself, managing the family, governing the country, and pacifying the world" (xiushen qijia zhiguo ping tianxia). It emphasizes establishing harmonious relationships with people around themselves, often being more friendly to others than to one's own compatriots. The so-called "It's a pleasure to have friends coming from afar" (you peng zi yuanfang lai buyilehu) and "All men in the world are brothers" (sihai zhinei jie xiongdi) express the hospitality of the Chinese people and their concern and tolerance for the whole human race.

The humanistic criticism developed under the influence of Confucianism is

to some extent a form of moral criticism, which forms a parallel relationship with ethical and moral criticism in the history of Western literary criticism. Therefore, the revival and rise of literary ethical criticism in contemporary China<sup>1</sup> is to some extent related to the revival of Confucianism in contemporary China, and it has played a role in reversing the Post-humanist criticism and other later critical theories to a certain extent. Of course, in the past few hundred years, Confucianism has also gone through vicissitudes. Through the revision and development of the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, as well as the creative interpretation and abandonment by modern overseas New Confucianism, it has abandoned its disdain for women and is increasingly close to the humanistic doctrines from the West. Therefore, its influence is not limited to overseas Chinese settlements, but even has varying degrees of impact on people in Western countries. Nowadays, when the Spring Festival comes, some politicians in Western countries send holiday greetings to Chinese people and overseas Chinese in a way unique to Chinese people. Therefore, we can fully say that New Confucianism has almost become a universally applicable doctrine that can engage in dialogue with and complement Western modernity theories. There are many elements of traditional Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism in contemporary Chinese humanistic criticism.

It cannot be denied that Confucianism has also gone through vicissitudes and difficulties in modern China, and has developed to the current situation. In the New Culture Movement (1915-1923), Confucianism was severely criticized and condemned as a reactionary ideology against modernity. The pioneers of the New Culture Movement not only introduced “democracy” and “science” from the West, but also introduced a “humanism,” while expelling Confucianism, which represents traditional Chinese thought and culture, to the margin of thought and culture. Although scholars’ research on Confucianism continued to be conducted within a relatively narrow academic circle after the New Culture Movement, its humanistic dimension was largely replaced by humanism introduced from the West. Humanism, or the integration of humanism and Marxist social and historical criticism, has become the mainstream of modern Chinese literary criticism. The characteristic of this humanistic criticism is its distinct subjectivity and political

---

1 The revival and rise of literary ethical criticism in contemporary China largely depend on the great efforts of Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao. He not only organized quite a few international academic conferences in China, but also participated in the establishment of the International Society for Literary Ethics Criticism, and set up columns specifically discussing literary ethical criticism in some domestic and international publications, which had a significant impact. It is necessary to refer to a special issue “Ethical Literary Criticism: East and West” co-edited by Nie Zhenzhao and Shang Biwu for the international authoritative journal *Arcadia: International Journal of Literary Culture* 1 (2015): 4-117.

tendency towards reality, highlighting truth, goodness, and beauty, condemning falsehood and ugliness, and directly evaluating the value of the writers and works being criticized from the perspectives of social history and aesthetics. However, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), under the dominance of ultra-left trend of thought, this humanistic or humanitarian doctrine was also severely criticized as belonging to the bourgeoisie, and all works depicting human nature and humanitarianism were banned as a poisonous weed of feudalism. Even the early works of the recognized Russian proletarian revolutionary writer Maxim Gorky have been criticized as flawed works advocating bourgeois humanism, and Gorky's viewpoint that "literature is human studies" has also been criticized<sup>1</sup>, not to mention those contemporary Chinese writers and their works influenced by Gorky and Soviet literature.

In the era of reform and opening up after the Cultural Revolution, various Western cultural theories and trends rushed into China through translation, exerting a strong influence on contemporary Chinese literary criticism, and also playing an important role in updating the discourse of contemporary Chinese literary criticism. One of the primary tasks of the literary critical circles that ended the Cultural Revolution and entered the period of reform and opening up was to restore the status of realism, so that literature could face and describe people again, and become a form of "human studies." In the subsequent critical translation of Western modernist literature and its critical theories, Chinese critics also criticized the alienation of people and the distortion of human nature in Western capitalist society from the perspectives of realism and humanism. To be fair, in an era of distorted and repressed human nature, emphasizing literature as a study of humanity does have progressive significance. But let's think carefully from another perspective: Is it only human beings worth describing in literary works since everything is born in the vast world? Is the ecological environment and beautiful natural landscape that we rely on for survival also worth describing in literature? Classical Chinese poetry is known for its depiction of landscape scenery, and the animals that accompany

---

1 The current Chinese academic community generally believes that the proposition that "literature is the study of human beings" was put forward by Chinese critic Qian Gurong. In fact, if we look at it from a broader international context, we shall find that the earliest to propose this proposition was the Russian-Soviet writer Maxim Gorky. On June 12, 1928, Gorky was elected as a member of the Soviet "Local Chronicles." In his speech at the celebration of the Central Bureau of Local Chronicles in the Soviet Union, he referred to his main work as "human studies." Later, inspired by him, Qian Gurong published a very long article titled "On 'Literature Is the Study of Humans'" in the May issue of the *Literary Monthly* in 1957. The full text mentioned Gorky's name 33 times, and for the first time, he creatively expounded on it in the Chinese context.

humans also have life. Are they also worthy of literary description? From this perspective, it is not entirely correct to consider literature as a study of human nature, for it is not very comprehensive: literature should also be a “study of things” (Fu 161), which includes all things in the universe and natural landscapes, including objects, scenery, and animals, as well as some man-made objects. When explaining the role of narrative, some scholars have also proposed the concept of “narrative of things” (Tang 6).<sup>1</sup> Since there are literary works that describe all things in the universe, there should also be literary criticism to analyze and interpret these works. Therefore, there have been criticisms directed towards things such as material narratives and new materialist criticism. It can be said that ecocriticism, animal studies, and science fiction criticism that have emerged in the critical circles of both the East and the West in the past decades are the products of criticism and research on literature that depicts things. Because in the eyes of scholars of ecocriticism and animal studies, there are all things in the vast world besides humans, and they are also members of the Earth like humans. Literary works should not ignore their existence. As a literary criticism directed towards literary works, it is obviously not enough to only focus on humanistic criticism of humans. Therefore, it is not surprising that it is challenged by critical theories that take it upon themselves to dissolve anthropocentrism. The reason why we broadly summarize these critical theories with different backgrounds as part of Post-humanist criticism is because on the one hand, these critical theories contradict the traditional criticism of humanism, and on the other hand, they do not completely abandon the teachings of humanism. Therefore, it is quite legitimate to call them Post-humanist criticism.

So what exactly is Post-humanist criticism? What is its relationship with previous humanist criticism? Post-humanist criticism, as the name suggests, is a literary criticism that goes against the development of humanist criticism to its extreme. In terms of time, it comes after humanist criticism, but in terms of content, it challenges the anthropocentric consciousness of humanist criticism on the one hand, and on the other hand, it is difficult to let go of it, thus maintaining a certain degree of continuity with it. Therefore, it is called Post-humanist criticism, which is quite similar to the relationship between postmodernism and modernism. If literary criticism, which previously dominated, had distinct humanistic tendencies, strong subjectivity and value judgments among critics, then under the influence of Western literary and

---

1 In this regard, refer to Tang Weisheng's *Research on Narrative of Things*, published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 2024. In addition, Fu Xiuyan also believes that “literature is both a study of human beings and a study of things,” as seen in his paper “Literature Is Both a Study of Human Beings and a Study of Things.”

cultural theory, academic criticism has skillfully mastered critical discourse with Westernized characteristics and focused on theoretical analysis and interpretation of literary works. Through theoretical analysis and interpretation of the selected writers and works, it objectively demonstrates the importance of the writers and their works, rather than directly praising or criticizing a work as before. Critics influenced by formalist and structuralist theories focus on formal analysis and internal research of literary texts, with a level of refinement almost approaching scientific analysis, and their views are hidden in these refined analyses and interpretations. Critics influenced by phenomenology and the aesthetics of reception focus more on the reception research and interpretation of the meaning of the work, and rarely involve the role of the writer himself. Of course, their critical research to some extent fills a long-standing vacuum and deficiency in literary history: the neglect of the author's reception and the critic's interpretation. Critics influenced by the Freudian psychoanalysis focus their analytical strokes directly on writers, analyzing their unconscious psychology and interpreting their works. The later Lacanian psychoanalytic critics, on the other hand, emphasize the unconscious structure of language and attempt to reinterpret traditional psychoanalysis through structuralist methods, bringing it closer to literature through the mediation of language. Deconstructive criticism, as a backlash against the linguistic tendency of structuralism, expands the scope of criticism to the cultural aspect, but still focuses on the theoretical interpretation of literary works. Moreover, this interpretation is usually not intended to serve the interpretation and criticism of literary works, but rather to reach the level of theoretical interpretation through the analysis of literary works, and so on.

Of course, we can say that interpretation is a form of criticism, and it is also the strength and main task of these academic critics. Undoubtedly, the rise of academic criticism with a solid theoretical foundation and its dominance in criticism have to some extent pushed traditional humanistic criticism to the margin of critical circles, especially in international theoretical debates where their voice and status are absent. It should be acknowledged that today in the contemporary literary critical community, it is the academic critics who have received rigorous training in humanities and have solid theoretical skills. Literary criticism is integrated with literary interpretation and research: excellent literary criticism must have profound ideas and unique critical styles. Similarly, only criticism with profound ideas and theoretical heights can occupy a place in the history of criticism. It can be said that it is the advent of the posthuman era that has brought together various post-theoretical criticisms aimed at deconstructing human centeredness under the banner of posthumanism, forming a Post-humanist criticism that is different from previous

humanist criticism.

Undoubtedly, the rise of Post-humanist criticism in contemporary times is by no means accidental, but it should be an inevitable product of the posthuman era. As mentioned earlier, the important characteristic of posthuman beings is to make humans, who used to be the “primates of everything” and the “masters of the Earth,” face up to and value the existence and equal status of other species on Earth. Undoubtedly, for a long time, humans have had a sense of superiority. They have not only failed to treat their fellow animals living on Earth well, but have also indiscriminately hunted and killed animals, taken their fur, or eaten their flesh, bones, and internal organs. Over time, these animals became enemies of humans, with some animals such as tigers, leopards, wolves, snakes, and scorpions seeking opportunities to retaliate against humans. Some also conspire with viruses in nature to attack the human body, causing humans to contract various diseases and appear very weak and powerless in the face of these viruses. Of course, humans have not treated nature well, but have continuously transformed it according to their own wishes, squandering and wasting natural resources at will, and damaging the natural ecology and environment. All of this has also been subjected to the crazy retaliation of nature. In the past ten years, under the attack of a series of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, conflagrations, typhoons, tsunamis that has spread around the world in recent years, human beings have finally felt the fragility of life, and they need to rethink of their relationship with nature. The emergence of the posthuman phenomena aims to remind humans that they, like other species, are a part of all things in nature. Therefore, humans should live in harmony with nature and not arbitrarily transform it, squander and exhaust natural resources, or even attempt to conquer nature, as they used to do in the past. The rise of contemporary ecocriticism and animal studies is to some extent a post-humanistic direction of literary criticism in the posthuman era.

On the other hand, the rapid development of contemporary high technology and artificial intelligence has also posed severe challenges to the status and role of humans. Especially the implementation and promotion of artificial intelligence or AI, as well as the popularity of ChatGPT in recent years, have brought severe challenges to literary creation, translation, and criticism. People are surprised to find that not only can poetry creation be done with AI, but literary translation has also become very convenient and effective with AI. It can be said that more than 80% of the work that human authors or translators usually do can be done by AI, and the quality is not so bad. Especially the translated text is at least very authentic in terms of language, and excellent human translators only need to make slight modifications, polishing, and supplement with special terminology and concepts that are difficult for AI to

recognize, in order to make the translation reach a high level. AI can also produce poetry with basic correct rhythm and tonal rhythm according to human instructions. The same goes for literary criticism. We only need to input some instructions to explain the basic requirements of the critical article we want, and we can quickly get a preliminary draft. Although the literature is not comprehensive and the viewpoints are not very clear, we can do some processing and improvement to reach the level of publication. It can be said that most of the work that humans do can now be replaced by AI. In this way, what value does traditional humanist literary criticism still have? Under the impact of generative artificial intelligence based on big language models, the copyright of humanities scholars who mainly engage in writing is undoubtedly greatly affected. This is indeed a problem that troubles scholars engaged in literary ethical criticism. It is also a phenomenon addressed by Post-humanist criticism. This issue will be discussed in the final section of this article.

### **Posthumanism: Literary Criticism in the Posthuman Era**

As mentioned above, in the current posthuman era, post-humanist criticism has begun to ascend to the forum of criticism. Like all the other post-theoretical critical theories, it is also responsible for challenging and deconstructing (anthropocentrism), launching attacks on all human-centered consciousness, and ultimately restoring human status as a member of the natural world. Where are the impact and limitations it generates reflected? I will provide a brief summary in the final section.

Firstly, the earliest areas where Post-humanist criticism challenged humanist criticism were ecocriticism and environmental research. These critics love the natural environment and try to maintain the ecology that humans rely on for survival. Therefore, they feel disgusted with all attempts to destroy the natural ecology and environment and launch strong attacks against these deeds. Indeed, throughout the history of world literature, depicting the relationship between humans, nature, and the ecological environment has always been an inexhaustible theme in literary works. In terms of nature description in modern Western literature, people generally trace back to Henry David Thoreau, the founder of American nature writing. Although many writers before Thoreau had already involved the relationship between humans and various species and environments in their own works, the most popular works were those that described the relationship between humans and the natural environment, as well as humans and animals. The relationship between humans and nature is generally harmonious, but sometimes humans, in order to rapidly develop production and improve their quality of life in a short period of time, often spare no effort to develop themselves at the cost



of damaging or depleting natural resources, which inevitably leads to opposition between humans and nature. Of course, nature's retaliation against humans is also ruthless. In recent decades, we have tasted enough of the disasters brought about by nature's retaliation against humans. Ecocriticism emerged to improve and readjust the relationship between humans and nature. Ecocriticism is aimed at literary works that describe the ecological environment and the relationship between natural species and humans, and provide interpretations and criticisms of them. Although the intellectual resources of ecocriticism can be traced back to ancient times, modern ecocriticism generally refers to a critical theory and method that emerged in developed Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s. On September 27, 1962, the book *Silent Spring* by American biologist Rachel Carson was officially published. The publication of this book sparked people's reflection on the fate of the damaged environment, and also marked the official appearance of literary ecocriticism in the European and American literary critical circles. Since its birth, ecocriticism has made significant progress in both Western and Chinese contexts, while China's ecocriticism combines theories introduced from the West with local ecological resources. In addition, most of China's ecocritics have received strict training in English writing in Western universities, so their articles published in English have had a wide international impact. It can be said that among various contemporary critical schools in China, ecocriticism may be the earliest and most closely connected critical school to align with its international peers.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, post-humanism also focuses on animals on Earth. Animal studies, which are currently flourishing in the Western critical circles, were initiated by some scholars who previously focused on posthuman phenomena and engaged in ecocriticism. We previously regarded it as a sort of "animal turn" in contemporary ecocriticism (Wang, "The 'Animal Turn' in Contemporary Ecocriticism" 34), and now it seems that the so-called "animal turn" is also an important turning point in Post-humanist criticism. In recent years, the relationship between humans and other species on Earth has undergone dramatic changes, making the relationship between humans and animals an increasingly important topic of concern for writers and literary critics. This phenomenon is also a hot topic of concern for theorists in the post-theoretical era. In this regard, post-theoretical philosophers and theorists like

1 As one of the earliest scholars to introduce Western ecocriticism into China, while writing in Chinese, Wang, one of the authors of this article was also invited to edit three special issues with ecocriticism as the theme for three international journals, which had some significant international impact. See Wang Ning, ed. *Beyond Thoreau: Literary Response to Nature*, a special issue, *Neohelicon* 2 (2009): 285-432; *Global in the Local: Ecocriticism in China*, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 4 (2014): 735-843; and *Ecocriticism in East Asia*, *Comparative Literature Studies* 4 (2018): 729-890.

Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>, Donna Haraway<sup>2</sup>, Cary Wolfe<sup>3</sup>, and others who have paid close attention to and provided important inspiration for ecological and animal studies have published quite a few works, and their works and critical ideas have become important theoretical resources for contemporary animal studies. Scholars engaged in animal studies generally believe that animals, like humans, are a species of all things on Earth. Due to their evolution over the years, some animals such as cats, dogs, wolves, etc. have begun to approach humans emotionally and ethically, and even engage in emotional communication with humans. The phenomenon of loving pets that has emerged in contemporary China and the West has sparked heated discussions among people. Some white-collar women, in order to reduce their living burden, even choose not to get married or have children, nor to find opposite sex partners, and instead fill this vacuum in their lives by keeping pets such as dogs and cats. They have a deep affection for these pets, and even try not to go on long trips for them. Even if it is necessary to go out, they will arrange for dedicated personnel to take care of these pets or drive them on trips together. Their indulgence and concern for pets at least indicate a sort of post-humanistic concern, so there are gradually more literary works that focus on animals as the main characters and describe the relationship between humans and animals. These are the texts that animal studies critics must rely on in their critical practice.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, with the rapid development of contemporary high technology, many writers have turned their attention to the metaverse or some virtual worlds, attempting to find inspiration and resources for literary creation. A literary phenomenon directly related to this tendency is the rise of science fiction and its rapid global development. The resurgence of science fiction in the era of globalization is closely related to the rapid development of contemporary high technology. If China's serious elite literature has been able to enter the world mainly thanks to the support of relevant national departments and foundations, then the entry of science fiction into the world is entirely due to the initiative of foreign translation and publishers. On the one hand, this indicates that these literary works explore issues of universal concern to all humanity, thus possessing a common value for all mankind. On the other hand, it also indicates that even in a virtual fantasy world

---

1 See Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, translated by David Wills, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008; *The Beast and the Sovereign* Vol. 1, translated by Geoff Bennington, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009; and *The Beast and the Sovereign* Vol. 2, translated by Geoff Bennington, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

2 See Cf. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.

3 See Cf. Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

or metaverse world, literary imagination is still indispensable. Since it is difficult to unleash this imagination in the real world, one must go to a metaverse or virtual world to search for and showcase it, because for writers from all over the world, their literary minds are interconnected. Humanist criticism should naturally pay attention to and make judgments on these phenomena. The ongoing science fiction criticism and studies in contemporary China and the West illustrate this point.

It can be seen that the rise of Post-humanist criticism can indeed make up for the shortcomings of previous humanist criticism, making contemporary literary criticism truly diverse. But what people are concerned about is whether the deconstruction of anthropocentrism in literary criticism will lead to an ecological or animal centric approach. Will emphasizing the “materialist” dimension and “narrative” of literature weaken the humanistic tendency and stance of literary criticism? We think we have made it clear in this article that Post-humanist criticism is not a complete rejection of humanism, but a backlash against the humanistic tendencies that have developed to the extreme. Because the humanistic dimension of literature can never be abandoned, although it cannot cover all aspects of literary creation and criticism. In this regard, Post-humanist criticism may play a vital role in filling some gaps.

### Works Cited

- 傅修延：“文学是“人学”也是“物学”——物叙事与意义世界的形成”，《天津社会科学》5（2021）：161-173。
- [Fu Xiuyan. “Literature Is the Study of Thing as well as of Man—Thing Narrative and the Coming into Being of the World of Meaning.” *Social Sciences in Tianjin* 5 (2021): 161-173.]
- Hayles, Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Hayles, Katherine. *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*. Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 2012.
- 唐伟胜：《物性叙事研究》。上海：上海外语教育出版社，2023 年。
- [Tang Weisheng. *A Study on Narrative of Thingness*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2023.]
- 王宁：“当代生态批评的‘动物转向’”，《外国文学研究》1（2020）：34-41。
- [Wang Ning. “The ‘Animal Turn’ in Contemporary Ecocriticism.” *Foreign Literature Studies* 1 (2020): 34-41.]
- . *After Postmodernism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2023.