

Reflections on the Posthuman Turn: Lynn Festa's *Fiction without Humanity*

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There can be little doubt that the field of eighteenth-century studies has provided fertile ground for the so-called “post-humanities.” As decades of scholarship in feminist and queer theory, critical race studies, and colonial and post-colonial studies have washed over the field, leaving it altogether less male, less white, and less European, so a new generation of scholars has accepted the invitation, offered by Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Bruno Latour, and others, to rethink the very category of the “human.” Whereas once it was common to view the eighteenth century as the one that enshrined the importance of “the individual”—in its art, in its literature, and in its politics—we are somewhat less inclined to do so nowadays. Rather than seeing hierarchy and distinction, we see entanglement. Rather than seeing the period through the lens of the Great Chain Being, we are more inclined nowadays to see it through the lens of animal rights. And rather than speaking of “man’s role” in configuring environments—as critics as diverse as Ian Watt and Keith Thomas might once have done—we instead speak more and more of the environment’s role in configuring the self.¹

I confess that I am not always convinced by some of these movements. Occasionally, post-Latourian accounts of the agency of objects strike me (to quote Oscar Wilde’s delightful invention, Lady Bracknell) as the “one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution.” I personally have never seen the rise of it-narratives, or stories tracing the first-person travels of an object, as anything more than an interesting historical sidelight. I have never been persuaded that poets like Alexander Pope or James Thomson—who believed devoutly in the Great Chain of Being—were secretly animal lovers. And I still think we have much to learn from Ian Watt and even more still from Keith Thomas, who happens to be one of my intellectual heroes.

Yet despite these feelings—in fact, because of these feelings—I admire Lynn Festa’s book *Fiction without Humanity: Person, Animal, Thing in Early Enlightenment Literature and Culture* all the more. Never have I been so convinced that we have arrived at the book that will define a field in relation to a critical turn. And as the posthuman turn continues to wash over the field of eighteenth-century studies, in much the same manner as the movements mentioned earlier, I predict that it will be this book that stands as its exemplar in conversations that take place ten, twenty, and thirty years from now.

Typically, at this point in the presentation, I reflect on some of the things that drew us, as a committee, to the prizewinning book. So, I will mention a few: its interdisciplinary range, which takes us on a journey from Dutch still-life painting to the experimental philosophy of the Royal Society to Aesop’s fables; its comparative element, which extends laterally in space from Britain to France to the Low Countries but also backward in time to the classical Greece of Zeuxis and Apelles; and, perhaps most important to me, its capacity to reshape standard assumptions. I have spent much of my life teaching *Robinson Crusoe*—probably like many assembled here for this colloquium—as the founding document in a “modern,” Protestant conception of the importance of the individual. Yet I will have to rethink this assumption the next time I step into the classroom. For, as *Fiction without Humanity* shows, Defoe’s novel seems equally preoccupied

¹ See, for instance, Sean Silver, *The Mind is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), which won the Kenshur Prize in 2016.

by showcasing the individual perspectives of things, offering “the ability to apprehend the world from the perspective of [Crusoe’s earthenware] pot or to find ourselves in the hollow of the footprint” discovered by Crusoe in one of the novel’s most memorable scenes (Festa 254).

What stands as the most compelling facet of the book, therefore, is its embrace of some—but not all—of the tenets of posthumanism and of the “new materialism” more broadly. Rather than arguing for the “agency” of objects (an article of faith that I have never truly accepted), the book instead traces those forms of eighteenth-century art and culture that sought to imagine the first-person perspective of objects and animals. Consider, for example, this passage discussing the function of first-person narration in the genre of the riddle:

By withholding the identity of the speaker, the riddle obliges the reader to imagine the world through another’s eyes in order to determine the “proper” identity of the riddle-creature. Its first-person form invites an experimental extension of the self beyond the purview of our own species in a deliberate courtship of self-loss. Rather than mirroring the reader as she already is or offering a figure with whom to identify, the riddle steeps us in the lived experience of a radically different form of being. (Festa 135)

I admit that I have never completely understood Jonathan Swift’s fascination with riddles—probably because I have never understood anyone’s fascination with riddles. Yet within the quoted analysis, one sees with great clarity how riddles fit within Swift’s larger career as a satirist. Riddles written from the perspective of a pen, or a candle, or a louse force the reader to apprehend the world and, indeed, the self differently, from the outside rather than from the inside. We see ourselves, in other words, as we are rather than as we think we are, much like Gulliver when confronted by the King of Brobdingnag’s dismissive words on the paucity of human achievement.

As pronouncements about the “death” of the field—and indeed the discipline—proliferate in the era of COVID, shrinking humanities departments, and job scarcity, I am heartened to see that books like this one continue to be written. I am also heartened to see so many of you here, even if only virtually. This past year brought perhaps the strongest field of books that I have reviewed in my decade of serving on this committee. It would have taken a remarkable book to rise to the top of this heavyweight field—but that is what has occurred.