Forms of a Posthuman Fantastic in Mia Gallagher's *Shift*

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Abstract. In posthuman philosophy the human subject is not regarded as an entity but a relational process. Yet the historical construct of "the individual" remains the (unconscious) reference point in human perception, feeding ego- and anthropocentrism. This article will argue that in their call to revise the static ideal of the individual entity posthuman philosophers find "allies" in fiction. More specifically, the fantastic is a genre which offers great possibilities to drastically reshuffle basic tenets of perception. Mia Gallagher's *Shift* offers a spectrum of fantastic stories in which protagonists relate to human and nonhuman agents such as animals, minerals, air and water. But, in this posthuman theory and fiction, not only human beings are deconstructed into relational nodes; the categories that constitute them are no independent concepts either, but mere interactional factors. This article's analysis of Gallagher's short stories focuses on the ways in which self and other, nature and culture, life and death, feminine and masculine, interior and exterior worlds interact.

Keywords. The posthuman as anti-individual, Mia Gallagher, Rosi Braidotti, the fantastic, being relational and transversal.

Resumen. En la filosofía posthumana, el sujeto humano no se considera una entidad, sino un proceso relacional. Sin embargo, la construcción histórica del "individuo" sigue siendo el punto de referencia (inconsciente) en la percepción humana, alimentando el egocentrismo y el antropocentrismo. Este artículo argumentará que, en su llamada a revisar el ideal estático de la entidad individual, los filósofos posthumanos encuentran "aliados" en la ficción. Más específicamente, la fantasía es un género que ofrece grandes posibilidades para reorganizar drásticamente los principios básicos de la percepción. *Shift* de Mia Gallagher ofrece un espectro de historias fantásticas en las que los protagonistas se relacionan con agentes humanos y no humanos, como animales, minerales, aire y agua. Pero, en esta teoría y ficción posthumanas, no sólo los seres humanos se deconstruyen en nodos relacionales; las categorías que las constituyen tampoco son conceptos independientes, sino meros factores de interacción. En este artículo el análisis de los cuentos de Gallagher se centra en las formas en que interactúan el yo y el otro, la naturaleza y la cultura, la vida y la muerte, el mundo femenino y masculino, interior y exterior.

Palabras clave. Lo posthumano como anti-individual, Mia Gallagher, Rosi Braidotti, lo

fantástico, relacional y transversal.

Introduction: the posthuman and the fantastic

This article wants to analyse Mia Gallagher's short story volume *Shift* (2018) through the lens of "posthuman" philosophy. As its title suggests, the fifteen short stories reveal protagonists to be constantly morphing beings; and as they move in multiple non-hierarchical relations with human and non-human f/actors they show a striking similarity with the themes and thoughts of Rosi Braidotti and with other Deleuzian thinkers like Jane Bennett and Brian Massumi. As Braidotti explains, she was trained by post-68 philosophers who were called anti-humanists because they questioned the concept of the human being as an entity. Whether it was Foucault, Derrida, Lacan or Deleuze, they all saw the human being as a split subject, and the need for a deconstruction of Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian ideal of Man as the standard of both perfection and perfectibility" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 24). Instead Braidotti called for a "new theory of the subject that acknowledges the decline of Humanism" (*Posthuman* 51), a moving away from this "liberal individualistic view of the subject, which defined perfectibility in terms of autonomy and self-determination" (*Posthuman* 23). "Individualism is not an intrinsic part of 'human nature', as liberal thinkers are prone to believe, but rather a historically and culturally specific discursive formation" (*Posthuman* 24). So having an id/entity as a model is setting the wrong standard, one of "Sameness – by which all others can be assessed" (*Posthuman* 26). But while anti-humanism aimed to break up the ruling concept of entity, postmodernism did not only want to debunk the Renaissance model of the "white, European, handsome and able-bodied" which is but a fictional contour, it wants to offer positive, dynamic and non-hierarchical models instead. This meant that the individual is replaced by that which constantly breaks the contour: interactional patterns (*Posthuman* 24). The subject *is* not, it is ever-becoming, "a relational process" (*Posthuman* 41).

To counteract the traditional hierarchies in which the unitary subject was situated Deleuzian thinkers defamiliarize anthropocentric perception by foregrounding non-human actants: we need to develop "an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 49-50). This means that not only natural actants have to be taken into consideration but also "the technological artefact" (*Posthuman* 26). To posthumanists nature and culture are not opposites. Not only subjects are non-unitary, concepts and categories are too: thinking should move beyond all "lethal binaries" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 37). This presupposes that "we need to practise de-familiarization as a crucial method in posthuman critical theory and learn to think differently" (*Posthuman* 93), and this should happen, in Guattari's words, "through 'chaosmic' de-segregation of the different categories" (93) – something Braidotti herself called "scrambling the master-code of phallocentrism and loosening its power over the body" (*Metamorphoses* 124). This means that a self is "differential", both matter and energy, "embodied and embedded" (*Posthuman* 22, 49, 51-2, 137). The hierarchy in all traditional opposites has to be scrambled, and Braidotti distinguishes four main interacting categories through which the human develops: it "unfolds the self onto the world" (Braidotti, "Critical Theory" 26), oscillates on the "nature-culture continuum" (19), it "enfold[s] the world within" (26) and seeks its way between the poles of feminine and masculine, echoing Judith Butler's gender performativity. Yet while the relations between self and other, nature and culture, inner and exterior worlds, masculine and feminine are vital coordinates, I want to add one pair which Braidotti only mentions in passing: that of life and death. These terms indicate degrees of presence and absence which will be relevant to us as Gallagher explores them throughout the fifteen stories in *Shift*. At times I will also refer to another posthuman thinker, Jane Bennett,

who focuses entirely on the nature-culture interaction exploring "affects" "not specific to human bodies" (Bennett xii). She considers "commodities, storms, metals" as "quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities […] of their own". In her decentering of anthropocentrism Bennett wants to "induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality" (Bennett x), an openness to "the active powers issuing from non-subjects" (ix), "nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies" to which humans should sharpen their five senses (ix).

The literary genre which most obviously invites readers to loosen their perception from its usual patterns and to sharpen their senses to the uncanny is of course the fantastic. In her most recent comprehensive study of the genre, *Fantasy* (2020), Lucie Armitt quotes the master critic of the genre, Tzvetan Todorov, who sees the literary fantastic primarily as that which brings "a breach in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality" (Armitt, *Fantasy* 41). In this sense "magic realism" is an epistemological tool, enabling "the uncanny, the ghost story" to let "one world bleed […] into the everyday world of realism and ruptures the membrane between the two" (Armitt, *Fantasy* 41). As the fantastic requires "ongoing hesitancy" as to [which]… causes are at work" (5) it keeps certainty at bay. Entities are unravelled, relations reconsidered: for Todorov, the fantastic is "a balancing act between the uncanny and the marvellous", which forms "a fictional world requiring 'new laws of nature" (Armitt, *Fantasy* 41). Posthumanists welcome such suspension of certainty and while it is a scrambling of categories, as Maggie Anne Bowers indicates, Magic(al) Realism both splits and condenses to the extent that the term (and the worlds it stands for) form an oxymoron (1). She indicates that the concept, originating in the 1920s, was meant "to capture the mystery of life behind the surface reality (Bowers 2). "Because it breaks down the distinction between the usually opposing terms of the magical and the realist, magical realism is often considered to be a disruptive narrative mode" (Bowers 3), "suited to exploring […] and transgressing boundaries, whether the boundaries are onto logical, political, geographical, or generic" (Zamora and Faris qt. in Bowers 64). Thus calling for an open mind and creative thinking, posthumanist philosophers would agree with Anne Swinfen who calls for the marvellous, because it goes "beyond the world of empirical experience" (5). Even Jane Bennett, who is otherwise not inclined to look at the human psyche, recognizes the importance of "childhood experiences of a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects" (ii), as this is a fine exercise in empathy. But as the genre of the fantastic ruptures old certainties and creates empathy with the non-human it also appeals to posthumanists as "magical realism offers to the writer wishing to write against totalitarian regimes a means to attack the definitions and assumptions which support such systems" (as, e.g. colonialism)". Indeed magical realism fits the demand of heterogeneous perception as it "opposes fundamentalism and purity" (Cooper cited in Bowers 22). Magical realist texts are subversive: "their in- betweenness […] encourages resistance to monological political and cultural structures" (Zamora and Faris, cited in Bowers 64).

Mia Gallagher is familiar with both the posthuman and the fantastic. Well read in Marx, Foucault and Butler she takes a feminist, postcolonial, environmental view in public debates. In her participation in the project "Europe in Ireland" she observes how "the conservative, patriarchal right-wing establishment" of the State in Ireland has diminished so that questions of gender, LGBTQ and reproductive rights can be discussed in a more open climate. The Brexit situation makes her all too aware of the hierarchies that belonged to the Irish postcolonial context: "We were the 'lesser-than' [Britain]… in that relationship for centuries" and Irish citizens must be alert so as not to lapse back into that attitude. Gallagher is also very active in environmental issues, demanding a stop in using "bee-killing neonictonoids" and fining "big polluters for the plastic waste that they generate" (Gallagher

2021). She observes that "real green justice would mean massive changes to the way capital flows and big business operates": only then the "capitalist divide-and-conquer control mechanism" can be reversed. But for such vast enterprise one needs imagination, and Gallagher's tends to the fantastic. In 2016-17 she was guest editor for a special issue of *The Stinging Fly* on this very topic. That Gallagher chose the title *Fear and Fantasy* is very significant. In her editorial she refers to "Jeff VanderMeer's strange, creepily urgent sci-fi novel *Annihiliation*" (*Stinging Fly* 5): she is all too aware of the vast, devastating effects which humans have on their biotope, the Anthropocene, and "works of horror and fantasy […] are stabs at a particular type of meaning-making." It is all about trying to "plumb the depths of what makes me – or you – or us – afraid and put a strange new shape on it" (Gallagher, *Stinging Fly* 6). But while *Fear and Fantasy* shows Gallagher's endeavour to map our threatened planet as an editor, *Shift* shows her own range of imaginative powers as spread over fifteen short stories.

Shift[1]

As the very title of the volume indicates, *Shift* is not so much about the human being, but about the "human becoming"; and in that interactional process, as Braidotti and Pieter Vermeulen indicate, "[t]he boundary between human and nonhuman is an unstable one" (Vermeulen 2). "Home turns out to be a weirder place than we remember" (Vermeulen 9). When Braidotti urges readers to "think harder about the status of human subjectivity" ("Critical Theory" 13) stressing the "relational, transversal and affirmative" aspects of being ("Critical Theory" 16), this is exactly what we find in Mia Gallagher's *Shift* – though very often the affirmative is problematic as the protagonists' energy is not always within their control.

For a start, the volume's form is important. In the interview with Gallagher in this issue the author points out that the book's macrostructure is a composition rather than a collection: though each of the fifteen stories can be read on their own, they are not quite "individual" but interact with each other. An analysis which could decide whether these short stories should be seen as cycle, a composite novel or a collection is beyond the scope of this article, but the author clearly states that "The ordering was not a separate thing but an integral part of the rewriting".[2] More specifically *Shift* is a composition of variations of the uncanny: some descriptions are slightly defamiliarizing, others more wildly so; others are situated in a markedly dystopian context. Thus it offers a wide spectrum of the fantastic "from utopia, to science fiction, […] to ghost, to fairy-tales, to magic realism, to the uncanny" (Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction* 13). Of all these subgenres, the only one lacking in *Shift* is utopia.[3] While this analysis will refer to these aspects of the fantastic, the focus will be on the ways in which Gallagher represents the self as a differential being, embedded and embodied by the interactions between self and world, nature and culture, life and death, feminine and masculine, psychological inside and social-material outside.[4] Of course, these relational pairs will also work transversally as the inside-outside interrelation will play a role in any act of self-formation.

Self and Other

That Gallagher depicts the posthuman as an interrelational rather than individual being is especially clear in the opening story, "More Often in Future", the next one, "Found Wanting", and in "Headhunter".

In the first story the lines fracturing the individual are threefold: protagonists want to take the lead but are led, their names belie their lives, and they are at war with their bodies.

The main protagonist is Trish: "Trish belonged to the elite. Dressed well, smoked, made fun of the teachers. She had it all" (4). This is how Noelle sees Trish, but things don't work out. In the school play "Trish got the lead. She was to be possessed" (7). Only she is not in control, but suffering from a deep-seated fear: "She'd always been haunted. A devil on her shoulder, an infant demon with invisibly black eyes and breath like a blown-out match. Hey, it said, and whispered cold things in her ears. Her name was Beatrice" (3). Her fear makes Beatrice all but beatific. The contrast couldn't be greater: instead of being serene, she self-harms. "She claimed a spirit had done it. She'd gone to bed, usual time, nothing strange, and woke up covered in scratches. […] Her evidence was admirably tangible" (7). But because of this body language Trish cannot play the possessed, she *is* possessed, divided from herself. A second unfortunate relational link is that with her 'best friend', because "Noelle envied her" (4). Yet as Noelle is obsessed with Trish's brother this connects them more strongly as they grow older, and as Trish unburdens her fears with Noelle she is drawn into the circle of fear: "Trish had told her lots of things […] she put her arm around her while Trish told her about the entities coming at her […] Claws tearing at her from inside, baby demons scratching for birth demanding she be mother" (14). By the story's end Noelle is sucked into Trish's atmosphere: "The devil that once-envied Beatrice fears in the night, clawing at her chest covered in skin like the brother's, is waiting"(15), and staying. It is Christmas time, but Noelle hates it, and so also shares Beatrice's contrast between her name and her life.

In "Found Wanting" the title immediately highlights the subject's incompleteness, but here the atmosphere is positive; the unnamed protagonist is not overcome by fear but by passion. Though the unnamed I-narrator is happily married to Mark, she is completely split and reconfigured into contrasting parts by the turbulence of her passion for Johnny: "[s]haking like a schoolgirl, ice down my front, forehead to crotch, insides sloshing petrol" (42). Body and soul, material and immaterial aspects, alternatingly take control: "I felt any certainty that had been in me drain away into a black void that was telling me it used to be my soul, but just as I was about to lever myself off him, he did something […] and that surprise came again, freeing me" (53). There is no hierarchy between the poles: body and soul both have their impact. There is also more balance than in the previous story as the protagonist can control her obsession: "You are only here, I said to him in my dream last night, because I want you to be" (54). In this story, self can win from the Other: "You can call it an exorcism if you want" (61). But again the characters are no entities but poles in interactionality. This is highlighted in the sexual exchange: "I can't, even now, articulate what I was freed of. He moaned. I imagined him absorbing it, whatever the act had sloughed off me" (53). The give and take turns out beneficial to the narrator: "more of my self was being pared away, but whatever was left was more me" (57). This in turn feeds into the amalgamate "self" formed by the married couple, as the lover proved to have been "just the superhighway that would lead me to a brand new I, me-and-Mark to a brand new Us" (51).

The protagonist of "Headhunter", also called the "Bear", is a young addict whose self is literally stitched together: after an accident "the two sides of his face are sewn together with black thread. Not right in the head" (181). Not only do the fault lines in the face also run through the "inside world", they go back all the way in the history of Bear's existence. That apparently started with a "congenital condition, something that's been with him since he was born" (181); the major accident happened when he was eight; this was followed by an addiction, and there is an indication that Bear may have murdered his younger brother. While Braidotti talks of "the rejection of self-centred individualism" (*Posthuman* 48), Gallagher's protagonists have not even had the chance to reject such individuality: many of them were haunted out of themselves by other (f)actors.

The nature-culture continuum

Gallagher's characters are clearly "a carnal and moveable assemblage […] deconstructed so that all diversity and differences can be teased out" (Braidotti, "Critical Theory" 14). One strong indication of "intradividual" diversity in *Shift* is that in ten out of fifteen stories the protagonist's "assemblage" is dependent on the chemistry of drugs or alcohol. Trish is on pills (14), Maggie in "Lure" has difficulty with "the tricky self-medicating times" (160), in "Departure" the whole family needs medication (131), the woman in "Found Wanting" felt on "an all-too common chemical high" (42) and Bear "is sweating again. Probably the drugs" (178). Yet two stories stand out in which the carnal-chemical, or nature-culture continuum, is stretched in special ways, "beyond anthropocentrism" (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 50). One story, "Lure", expands the notion of Life towards "the non-human or *zoe*" (50), which is the animal, vegetal and mineral aspect of life; "Pinning Tail on Donkey" goes the other way, showing how technology, the artificial, is quickly becoming a component of our humanity.

While "More Often in Future" was a ghost story in which the demon won out over two friends, the demon in "Lure" is friendlier and more keeping a balance of agencies, as in Todorov's "marvellous". The protagonist, Maggie, or Magpie, is linked to a kelpie, a faun-like water spirit.[5] It is the most surprising of the stories in the sense that inside and outside worlds of the disturbed woman are constantly mixed up, showing how "bio-genetics and neurosciences, […] environmental sciences […] and disability studies" interact (Braidotti, "Critical Theory" 19). The reader is never very sure where Magpie finds herself: in a pub, on a walk, in her care home, or in a daydream: all sense of situation disappears in the face of Magpie's fascination with water. The story opens with

> It's those little bitches start it, sniffing her out at the Black Horse. The rain helps. […] the waters under the city are high, squirming for release. But were there no bitches, […] the chain of confluence may never have led to me. […] It's that feral intent first disturbs my sleep, down in the gravelly bed of small, sweet Camac. (149)

All through the story the narrating voice is the kelpie's, and whether the bitches are intermedial beings like Queen Titania's servants in *A Midsummernight's Dream*, or just itches Maggie feels (psychological or physical ones) as she is drawn to the water, remains open. All causal links are replaced by marvellous ones; logical connections are replaced by juxtapositions between the kelpie's view and that of Magpie, keeping up the ambiguity of the relations between the swelling powers of the river Camac and those of Maggie's erotic urges. This is where Gallagher's prose is "chaosmic": like Jane Bennett's philosophy, its narrative "stretches the concepts of agency, action, and freedom" (2); it "dissipate[s] the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, […] to induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality" (Bennett x). In this story the author manages a tour de force in that nothing is "individual", all is "spectral", mere perceptions on a spectrum, one "in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve, and disintegrate" (Bennett xi). Here, more than in any other story, Bennett's proposition that the posthuman must "tune in to the strange logic of turbulence" (xi) ties in with Gallagher's idea of the Baroque, as she explains it in the interview.[6] The author also meets Todorov's imperative that the marvellous has to balance magic and realism; it requires "ongoing hesitancy" as to [which]… causes are at work" (Armitt, *Fantasy* 5). Here, not only self and other, nature and culture, but also inside and outside worlds mix: the kelpie can "smell her thoughts as they glitch, clusterfucking the pathways of her most unusual brain" (152). And like in the previous stories body and soul are entwined, matter and energy fuse beautifully when

I see her heart's hoofs gallop through her miraculous flesh, course wanton in her bloods, doing patient battle there with the meds and serial vaccinations […] Under the putrid chemi-foam I taste the proud steel of her will And spent, I come to rest, sinking in spirals down the unknowable labyrinth of her perfect human mind. (174)

In "Pinning Tail on Donkey" it is technology which invades the posthuman. More specifically the narrator finds herself in the situation Braidotti warned about: in "the era of bio-genetic capitalism and nature-culture continuum, *zoe* has become an infra-human force and all the attention is now drawn to the emergency of disappearing nature" (*Posthuman* 112). The narrator is an unnamed human who tells a dystopian futuristic tale. She lives where "toxic flowers" grow, "the fruits of a biosphere poisoned by *yes, I, we, yes, I admit it,* us"; and "[t]he cyborbarians [are]…at the gates" (223). The narrator reminisces about how "our once great technocracy" (194) was marked by "the Fossilfuel&WaterWar […] your great-grandparents' generation called the Boom"(194). It was also a theocracy with Irish overtones, with "Schools, run by the last generation of the dying, nationstate's once-dominant theocrats: the Priests-n-Nuns" (194). But the story also reflects how "contemporary science and biotechnologies affect the very fibre and structure of the living" (*Posthuman* 40) reaching "unprecedented degrees of intimacy and intrusion", to the extent that the borders "between the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal" are obfuscated (*Posthuman* 89). This intrusion comes shockingly into focus in the story's final sentence revealing the narrator to be partly manufactured, when she speaks to a child who grows up with machines: "Take my hand, my Primcess[TM] hand […] Smile for the camera" (223).[7]

Life and death

In her defence of *zoe,* the life force which humans share with non-human matter, Braidotti pleads for the human's opening up to "the inhuman within", death. She calls this "the becoming-imperceptible of the subject as the furthest frontier of the processes of intensive transformation or becoming" (*Posthuman* 136). On the one hand she sees death as a transition into the impersonal: "[i]t marks the generative force of *zoe*, the great animal-machine of the universe, beyond personal individual death" (*Posthuman* 135). On the other hand a human needs to make that transition uniquely personal: "each of us wishes to die in our own fashion. Our innermost desire is for a self-fashioned, a self-styled death" (*Posthuman* 135). Three of Gallagher's stories explore this field: "Departure", "You First" and "With Soldiers, in a Cup". The first one is the saddest one, as inter-human relationality fails. The oblique title is a euphemism for the radical "departure" of suicide. This need for being tuned into the energy of human emotions is central to *Shift*. At the start of the story the narrator is sorry that she did not pay enough attention to her friend's needs: "I wish I had been there. I was there, though. I wasn't too" (125). By the end the protagonist is left with objects, but these seemed to have absorbed a presence and they exude it, as the final sentence enumerates two objects throbbing with the dead man's plea for support: "Drawers full of paper in capital letters [...] and a chair knocked over by dying feet. A lot remains" (132).

In the second story, "You First", the protagonists are more "interrelational", even in the final stages of life. Adam is terminally ill and is visited by his childhood girlfriend, George. Though he is forbidden to smoke she does, and conveys the smoke to him in a kiss. Though the end is completely open, it may suggest a form of euthanasia, as the final sentence shows how "he closes his eyes and drops, towards the waiting blackness" (145).

The third story is the most interesting in the sense that the protagonist, Annie, chances upon three different ways to connect with her dead husband. First it is via a smell which

suddenly transplants her back into his presence: "I sniff at my collarbone, but it's not me. Then I get it. It's not a physical odour. It's as if something has ripped in the veil of reality. It's the same smell our house stank of before they took you away to that hospital. Panic, sick people, and death" (276). Second, the husband seems to have become part of *zoe*, as the house dog seems to come across traces of life left by her master: "Her head was brushing against air, her happy mouth open, her tongue lolling. Unseen small things lifting from her. Sparking, like dust" (281). The third way is the most tangible: in the moment where Annie is reconciled with the two major problems in her life, the domestic violence between her parents and the repeat of it in her own marriage, she accepts to have her husband's child posthumously (298). Becoming a mother, she will embody Life in a very concrete way.

Feminine /Masculine

Throughout *Shift* gender is a fluid thing, affecting the characters' bodies in different ways at different times. In order to go against stereotypes all stories defamiliarize expectations; the book cover too is significant here, as seahorses are said to be hermaphroditic. In the first story which touches upon the gender motif, "You First", Adam is the feminine character who grows up with George, the "tomboyish" girl who is "his big sister […] big brother, too" (137). She loves to play with marbles. "It's an unusual game for a girl, but then, that's George all over" (136).

In "Hello My Angel" the gender boundaries shift more drastically as Kevin, the male narrator, does not only lose his masculinity but his social visibility altogether. At the start of the story his lack of masculinity is only subtly indicated: "I am not very handy. My wife […] is more adept with power tools" (76). Later the wife is said "to patronize" and "bully" (84) the neighbours; after Kevin disappears she takes women lovers.

But it is the title story, *Shift*, which really focuses on gender questions; more specifically on Braidotti's hope that "the re- compositions of genders and sexualities sizzling under the apparently sedate image of equal opportunities … are productive events" and "bring into play untapped possibilities for bonding, community building and empowerment" (*Posthuman* 54). Dessie, a rather simple, xenophobic man, is reproached by his children for accusing refugees and immigrants for his own unemployment: "Da […] you're generalizing" (95). When he is offered a job with Christo, a coloured transvestite, he is asked "Are you of open mind, Mr Maguire?" (97) and answers in the positive. He starts off in a racist way asking Christo, who "was a dark even brown, like the best sort of toast": "Your daddy a nignog or what?" (113). But then he starts paying closer attention, noticing how "His hands were small for a fella" (99), finds out that he is a transvestite "Des was worried he was in a mood, or worse, a dress" (111) and accepts that the man is very feminine: "He's more like a mot the way he is now than with all the slap and high heels" (105). Later again Des' attitude grows to respect "and it was then Des saw – Him, he supposed" (104) developing to full empathy when he understands that Christo suffers from Seasonal Affective Disorder. […] It was because he thought he was never going to look like what he felt on the inside, he was only able to be … a mockery" (105). Finally, Des falls in love with Christo the same night the young man is murdered, yet his friend lives on in Des' perception. This is where the narrative is cleverly constructed: the story starts after Christo's death, when Des has become a driving instructor, assessing the girl he has to teach: "she's Mario fucking Andretti in a dress" (92).

Inside and outside worlds: Projections, Exudings

The interaction between inside and outside worlds is of course the central axis of all interactions. Jane Bennett observes that "Every nonhuman body shares with every human

body a conative nature" (2), the conatus meaning its impulse, its vectors. While Gallagher experimented with this idea in "Lure", anthropomorphizing the energies of water in a kelpie, it is clear that the author is more interested in human kinds of "vibrant matter". Brian Massumi focuses more on these which he sees as "real-material-but-incorporeal" energies exuded by human bodies. "Feelings have a way of folding into each other, resonating together, […] interfering with each other" and they do so in "unquantifiable ways" (Massumi 1). Yet Massumi stresses the tactile aspect of these exudings or tendencies: "The charge of indeterminacy carried by a body is inseparable from it … there is an incorporeal dimension *of the body*. […] Inseparable, coincident, but disjunct […] The real-material-but-incorporeal is […] to the body […] as energy is to matter" (5).

This is the case with "the Bear", when "Silence bristles round him. Shame crouches on his back and shoulders, breathing heat into his ear. The air is so loaded that even if Sonia could speak, she wouldn't. […] His feelings seep out from the edges […] Hurt, anger, love sex, death, addiction, sickness, hate, fire, silence" (82). Others are on the receiving end, like Annie, who feels invaded by her mother's transgenerational material, when she realizes her life patterns echo those of her parents: "I let your chaos infect me. […] letting things go like you did […] You never said anything, but I felt your approval glide over me" (276). Like her mother Annie "chose an angry man to share my life with" (283). Later, her need for her deceased husband's presence is so strong that she feels his "hands pass through me, catching on the soft bits inside" (281), pressing her to "regroup, corral my senses to the present" (282). Yet sometimes interactions between the corporeal and the incorporeal are intended, like when Trish is washing her hair, "trying to wash her brain, and only cold water will do the trick, blast it back into something like normal"(4).

In "Trust in Me" things get more complex as the protagonist uses an animal as an intermediary to 'objectify' his desire. The unnamed protagonist is a fat boy who is fascinated by Susie, a sex worker, and her python. He is strongly conflicted: he despises the girl he desires. In three "mental selfies" he projects his love-hate relation with the girl onto her snake. First he projects his anger onto the snake, seeing "The python wound around her body like a belt of ammunition" (247). Later, when he mentally prepares himself to destroy the girl by stealing her money, he is inspired by the reptile: "I made my face into nothing. I do remember that moment, the mask coming over me. Its tightness on my skin, warm as scales" (254). In the final sentence his obsession with Susie and the snake is complete, so that the incorporeality of his drive is becoming real for him: "This is what I want. […] I am in him, and he is around her, pushing his musculature into her strong-soft flesh, and they are one, and she is playing *Nights in White Satin* and I hear it through her skin, and his and my own" (258).

Finally, in "Hello My Angel" Kevin is the unreliable narrator-protagonist of this most surreal of the volume's stories, in which the uncanny moves into the weird. Kevin says he becomes "interested – I wouldn't say obsessed, just curious" (85) about the story of "Anchorites such as St Doulagh, who burrowed himself away in what is now the oldest stone-roofed church on the island, […] they withdraw from society and spend their lives walled up" (85). The subtext tells the reader that Kevin has voyeuristic tendencies; as the story progresses these solidify when he identifies so much with the "walled up saint" that he fuses with the wall and becomes a 'ghostly presence' in the wall between two terraced houses. As a result "the landlord can't get anyone to stay longer than a month. It's haunted […] I saw eyes in the kitchen wall", one tenant said (88). This is the most fantastic story of the whole volume, realizing the "subversive power" Rosemary Jackson finds in fantastic literature, which she situates more specifically in the fact that "it takes metaphorical constructions literally" (41). Indeed as in "fantastic narrative" one object "literally becomes that other, metamorphosing from one shape to another in a permanent flux and instability" (Jackson 42). In this sense the

fantastic is an apt genre to explore the "transversal being" of Braidotti's posthuman condition. Indeed in Kevin's place "Home turns out to be a weirder place than we remember", as Pieter Vermeulen had observed; "the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic" are dissipated (Bennett x) – and fused again.[8]

Conclusion: Gallagher's eco-humanism

In *Metamorphoses*, Braidotti stated the (post)human should be "freeing organs from their indexation to certain prerequisite functions" and this "calls for a generalized perversion of all bodily functions […] a joyful anarchy of the senses" (124). This is exactly what Mia Gallagher realizes throughout *Shift* and she seems to use the senses in three specific ways. First, that her protagonists prefer the "proximal senses" (touch, taste and smell) over distal ones (seeing, hearing) is symptomatic for a narrator whose perception focuses not on entities but on the interactional. Second, senses fuse, as in the haptic, which combines seeing and feeling, as in "The weight of his eyes on me made me ill" (49). Third, perceptions are usually strongly cathected with emotions as with "friends […] whose fears and evasions you smell"(43); or when the "shame you sense prickling on your own skin" (43).

To conclude, Gallagher's *Shift* seems to present us with forms of fantastic literature which clearly have the same goals, and work from the same presuppositions as posthumanists like Braidotti and, to a certain extent, Bennett. Yet rather than calling the author's work posthuman it seems eco-humanism is the more precise term. While the characters are open to many kinds of material vitality, and feel human and "nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies", it is human becoming which is central. And while both philosophers plead for an exploration of the "field of micropolitics" without which "There will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no enforcement" (Bennett xii), stories like the ones in *Shift* show that fiction has a vital role to play here. Without the imaginative highlighting of the weirdness of human relations we might lose sight of the fact that we are, still, in the process of turning our planet into an unhomely place, or to use Freud's original, a home that is *unheimlich*.

Notes

[1] When quoting from *Shift* I will leave out the reference as the source is identical throughout.

[2] The interview was done in March 2019 in the Leuven Centre for Irish Studies where Mia Gallagher was writer in residence at the time. The links between the stories are manifold. First, some stories are linked by a motif: the three first ones highlight people's linkages in triangulation. Another motif is that of space: many protagonists live in a hospital or prison (stories 8, 9, 10), indicating their "incompleteness". Or space forms a contrast: the fifth story is about a man who morphs into a wall while the next protagonist is constantly on the move (in all senses of the word). Each story is carefully constructed and always opens and closes with a packed* sentence. These strategic lines link up sometimes: the second story's last sentence refers to "the dark Jackie O glasses"(37) while the next one opens with: "I dreamt of him again last night. Johnny O" (41). Indeed the volume's opening and closing sentences form a pattern. While the first story opens with "She'd always been haunted" (3), a story about a young woman who is stuck in her development refuses to become a mother, the final one closes with "Baby girl, baby girl, I say. And then – stupid me – I start crying" (298): the protagonist has gone through a catharsis and now seems to be ready to welcome a child from her posthumous husband.

[3] As this article's focus is on the posthuman features rather than on the fantastic I will not go in detail about the subgenres of the fantastic. But the range is there: "More Often in Future" is a ghost story, "Pinning Tail on Donkey" sci-fi, "Lure" is magic realism, "Hello My Angel" is the most uncanny. Fairy tale elements are prevalent in "Polyfilla" and "Headhunter".

[4] While Braidotti does not mention the interaction between the categories of life and death in her 2016 article she highlights their intertwinement in her book *The Postmodern*. Indeed I believe they are a vital set of aspects of the (post)human. My own criticism of Braidotti is that she leaves out the "linguistic" aspect of things: the impact of

speech on things, the performative interactions between word and world are not only essential to the human but also central to the fantastic.

[5] This story had special importance to the author; but though Gallagher wanted to make it the title story, the writing took her so long "it was the last story to be resolved successfully. By that time the title *Shift* seemed to hit more buttons" Mia Gallagher conveyed this information, and the fact that "there's a residue of Lure as title – in the epigraph (Marvell poem) which is about hunting and luring..." in an email communication on 7 January 2021.

[6] To Gallagher the Baroque is an aesthetic organising approach which allows for chaos and curlicues, elaboration of associations which are then allowed to settle into an equilibrium.

[7] That Mia Gallagher is active in many ecological initiatives, supports the Green party and participates in talks about Artificial Intelligence (as at the event "Should We Fear the Algorithm" on May 1st 2019 in The Irish Writers' Centre https://irishwriterscentre.ie/products/ai-should-we-fear-the-algorithm) proves her great concern with the interactions between nature and culture. I consider these two stories as central to the volume, as "Lure" was meant to provide the volume's title while the book cover with its heterogeneous seahorses, constituted by mechanical bits, reflects "Pinning Tail on Donkey".

[8] Kevin's story clearly illustrates one "way in which the domestic world does not coincide with itself" (Fisher 10), and it highlights how subjects and objects can affect each other in their interaction. But the story also cleverly plays on Mark Fisher's difference between the weird and the eerie. Fisher states that the weird is constituted by "an exorbitant presence", one "which does not belong" while the eerie is constituted by a failure of absence or a failure of presence" (Fisher 61). The fact that Kevin fuses with the party wall between two houses means that he is 'under-present' to his wife (who only hardly notices him), but over-present to the neighbour (who feels his gaze on him).

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