

Title:

“A kind of purity”: inanimacy, disability, and posthumanist prefigurations in John Williams’

Stoner

Abstract: Animacy hierarchies conventionally descend from subjectivity and integrated animacy down towards insensate or dead matter. John Williams’ 1965 novel *Stoner* upends these hierarchies, positing aestheticized *inanimacy* as an ideal of the moral imagination.

Published as posthumanist thought begins to take shape, *Stoner* prefigures a distancing from the humanist view of life as an integrated and enduring tradition, described by Sloterdijk as an ‘exchange of letters’, I further argue that *Stoner*’s unconventional posthumanist effects are dependent upon quite conventional sexist and ableist conceptions of embodiment. The novel thus demonstrates the persistence of ideologically determined valuation criteria, and the plasticity of these criteria in new, posthumanist contexts.

Key words: animacy, posthumanism, embodiment, valuation hierarchies

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“A kind of purity”: inanimacy, disability, and posthumanist prefigurations in John Williams’ *Stoner*

*I am a little world made cunningly
Of elements, and an angelic sprite.*

John Donne

Books are thick letters to friends

Jean Paul

I am a rock, I am an island

Paul Simon

1. Introduction

William Stoner: as the protagonist of John Williams’ *Stoner* nears death, he reflects upon the difference between ideals and actuality. “He had dreamed of a kind of integrity, of a kind of purity that was entire; he had found compromise and the assaulting diversion of triviality.”¹ The difference exists between spirit and body, though at the last, the two are united. “There was a softness around him, and a languor crept upon his limbs. A sense of his own identity came upon him with a sudden force, and he felt the power of it. He was himself, and he knew what he had been.” (287). What he had been is a noble failure; in work, in love, in life.

Stoner's last moments are passed unaccompanied, in contemplation of an object: his single published book. As he himself becomes an object, it falls, in the novel's final words "into the silence of the room" (288). It is an apotheosis of sorts, in that Stoner achieves the integrity of objecthood, of *inanimacy*. The burdens of animacy – of complex embodiment and human entanglements – are finally laid down.

Thinking about animacy and inanimacy means thinking about "the precise conditions of the application of "life" and "death" [and] life and death's proper boundaries"², an enterprise for which *Stoner* provides rich and unusual raw materials for this endeavor. Animacy hierarchies conventionally descend from subjectivity and integrated animacy down towards "matter that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise "wrong"³, and therefore ontologically troubling. *Stoner* inverts this dynamic, linking inanimacy with purity and aspiration, and locating the origins of trouble in embodied, unruly life – human life framed as lacking, imperfect, and therefore impure, what Kristeva has termed *zoe*⁴, life embedded in time.

The aesthetic appeal of *Stoner*, manifest in its eponymous protagonist, are linked to the stillness and quietude of *ruins* – as represented by classical academe, both metaphorically and literally. "Sometimes he stood in the center of the quad, looking at the five huge columns in front of Jesse Hall that thrust upward into the night out of the cool grass; he had learned that these columns were the remains of the original main building of the University, destroyed many years ago by fire. Grayish silver in the moonlight, bare and pure, they seemed to him to represent the way of life he had embraced, as a temple represents a god." (14)

The ideal here expressed through inanimacy concerns the ethical and philosophical imagination as well as aesthetic appreciation. It provides a code of conduct as well as a

standard of judgment, in which external and internal qualities are inextricably linked. In other words, a world-view, embedded in and expressed through fiction.

This essay is an attempt to do three things. First, to explore how the ethical/aesthetic ideal of inanimacy and the world-view expressed in *Stoner*, finds narrative expression. Second, to understand how it resembles and prefigures a particular strain in posthumanist thought, which emerged roughly around the time of *Stoner's* publication. Third, to chart how this ideal, as exemplified in *Stoner*, is contingent upon a particular and problematic representation of human embodiment.

2. The world-view of *Stoner*

Some basics. John Williams' *Stoner* was originally published in 1965. It enjoyed something of a renaissance from the 2000s onwards, after being republished by New York Review Books. The story centers on William Stoner, a farm boy from whose parents send him to the University of Missouri to major in agriculture. Stoner, whose first name differs by only one letter from his author's last name, discovers literature at the university, and then devotes his life to it. This is due to an epiphany brought on by close reading of Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, which, amongst other things, thematizes aging, loss, and impending death.

Williams wrote four novels, *Stoner* being the third. His style is simple, verging on laconic, as shown most clearly by the novel's first paragraph. I quote it here in full, since it serves multiple functions – epitaph for the protagonist, exordium for the narrative, thematic encapsulation and central image of human beings concerned with books:

William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910, at the age of nineteen. Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same University, where he taught until his death in 1956. He did not rise above the rank of

assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses. When he died his colleagues made a memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library. This manuscript may still be found in the Rare Books Collection, bearing the inscription: "Presented to the Library of the University of Missouri, in memory of William Stoner, Department of English. By his colleagues." (1)

Stoner's life is here; this might, on the one hand, be considered enough. This *is* the narrative, in pure and simple form, though not without metaphoric/metonymic elaboration (Stoner is the medieval manuscript; he himself belongs and leaves his only trace in the Rare Books Collection). Then, of course, the novel expands upon and complicates the narrative. We are told of Stoner's courtship, his marriage, the birth of his daughter, and, perhaps most importantly, of the course of his professional life.

The story does not go well; it does not end well. Stoner is thwarted in his desire for scholarship and peace by the unruly bodies of others. First among these is his wife, Edith, wicked and frigid in the most Victorian senses. There is also Stoner's daughter, vulnerable to the world, who becomes his responsibility alone. There is also Stoner's colleague Hollis Lomax, and Lomax' protégé Charles Walker, both of them interlopers in the academy, false scholars, who not only threaten Stoner's career, but also his personal integrity and the study of literature as an institution. They lack intellectual honesty, and their bodies match their moral character; Lomax is deformed, a "small hump raised his left shoulder to his neck, and his left arm hung laxly at his side" (93), while Walker is a "cripple" (140). The imperfect world suffuses them, constitutes them and their flaws.

Stoner's own body is masculine and pure, and remains in this state until he succumbs to the impurities of the world; when he contracts cancer, the disease acts according to the rules laid

out by Sontag⁵, simultaneously a foreign invader and insidious agent of corruption. The young Stoner, the farmer's son, can endure physical as well as intellectual hardship because of his vocational call, his desire for purity, which he believes can only be realized through scholarship and teaching, in the academy. Stoner does not show ambition, does not play politics, and so does not rise in the temporal world.

Stoner's *name* could just as easily connote obtuseness or inertia, but within this particular novel the stone is construed as a more durable and reliable form of matter than the organic tissue with which it is contrasted. That it is also among the oldest known building materials, suitable for important, symbolic buildings, is underscored when Stoner first walks across the university campus, observing the columns that remain of an older building. He knows he is already living in the ruins of something, though he does not yet know what, and when he discusses the role of the academy with his two contemporaries, Dave Masters and Gordon Finch, they conceive of it as an asylum, a refuge, a space outside the changing world.

Bodies matter in *Stoner*, in ways that entwine aesthetics with morals. Perhaps the most readily available reading of the antagonistic relationships that structure the narrative (Stoner and his wife, Stoner and his academic enemies) is of the prosthetic kind pioneered by Snyder and Mitchell⁶, wherein the marked bodies of Edith (female, hysterical, frigid) and Lomax (impaired, traumatized, twisted) contrast with Stoner's initially unmarked body. The antagonists are comprehensible and their actions explicable in a way that Stoner is not, and their motivations arise entirely from their bodies. This reading has considerable appeal, since it is supported by nearly every instance of physical characterization in the novel, e.g. the deployment of Gordon Finch's robust, bluff and thoroughly embodied masculinity as a satisfactory explanation for his smooth and continuous rise in the university hierarchy, or Stoner's first and only mentor, Archer Sloane, who, dry-skinned and white-haired, functions as the desiccated remnant of what the academy once was.

3. Posthumanist prefigurations and troublesome animacies

1965 is at the cusp of the posthumanist moment⁷, barely ahead of the original publication of Foucault's *Le Mots et les choses*, the "locus growing more *classicus* by the day"⁸ of posthumanist thought. Famously, the book concludes with an image of a human face drawn in the sand, about to be erased by the waves, taking metonymically with it the contemporary notion of the human being, humanity, and the humanist tradition.

Stoner prefigures that posthumanist moment, and its concerns. It is in many ways a death-seeking narrative, or at the very least a narrative with a teleology determined by inanimacy. It is also a narrative in which organic matter and vitality are both construed as tenuous, fleeting, and unreliable. Stoner's family farm is hardscrabble to the point of barrenness, and his parents' attempt to revive their fortunes – by sending Stoner to study agricultural science – results only in his deeper engagement with inanimate (albeit potentially fertile) matter in the form of books. The drive towards stillness and death envelops a range of characters, not only Stoner himself. Dave Masters, his intellectually vital colleague, is killed in the First World War, quietly offstage. The death Archer Sloane, chair of the English department, follows as a direct consequence. Lacking a new and vital generation to follow him, he declines, turns hollow, his skin becomes like "ancient, drying paper" (39), and he is eventually found at his desk, having died at his increasingly marginal post.

By way of contrast, Stoner's engagement with inanimate objects, with materials and tools, is suffused by mastery and satisfaction. He refurbishes a house, builds a study, creating both a living space and a working space. His capabilities for physical work mirror his intellectual capabilities, suggesting a meaningful life built as much on ideals of craftsmanship as on human relationships.

Stoner's ideals stem from his sense of working *in the ruins*, looking for scraps in a great tradition that is no longer vital but can nevertheless provide glimmers of meaning, and which deserves care for that reason. His scholarly ambitions are modest and linked to pedagogy rather than investigation; Archer Sloane anoints him not as a researcher but as a teacher. Hollis Lomax, on the other hand, assumes the part of villain by displaying ambition, verbosity, a penchant for theory, and, most importantly, inauthenticity. He is hired at Stoner's university because of his academic reputation and proceeds to form a coterie, an intellectualist cult that stands in contrast to Stoner's ecumenical approach to literature.

In *Stoner*, humanism and its moral imagination dies with the First World War. What that entails is the extinguishing of a mystical, guild-like tradition wherein membership is conferred from master to apprentice. This tradition, viewed by Sloterdijk as a "chain letter through the generations"⁹, is threatened by the forces of scientific modernity, certainly, but just as much by the moribund tendencies of the tradition itself, its inability to embrace life. Consider the book's opening passage, which metaphorizes the posthumanist dilemma as viewed by Sloterdijk. Stoner *is* the medieval manuscript, committed to the Rare Books Collection, the archive, for all eternity; he will not be remembered, his works will not be read. His book – his only book – is a thick letter lacking a recipient friend, ultimately returned to sender.

What comes after the death of the tradition – what constitutes the posthumanist condition – is unbridled intellectual competition and dynamic politicization of what was essentially a feudal (though never apolitical) realm. Stoner is offered the opportunity to join the new order, but he is incapable of doing so. He belongs to the humanist tradition and so cannot survive long after it is gone.

Stoner displays an elegiac attitude towards humanism, casting its drive to inanimacy as inevitable, graven in stone. The infusion of new blood – new animacy – amounts not to an

existential threat (the battle is already over) but to a profanation. Gordon Finch's philistine vitality is one vector, infecting the administrative apparatus of the academy. The other vector is the damaged bodies of Hollis Lomax and Charles Walker; in both cases, unruly physicality enters what would otherwise be a sanctified, if dead, place.

Posthumanist thought is sometimes thought of, by itself, as rhizomatic, anti-hierarchical, and egalitarian. That does not mean that it is free of anxieties regarding valuation, and the value of lives. *Stoner* prefigures, narrativizes and entwines certain enduring anxieties of the posthumanist age, perhaps most singularly the twin anxieties of unbridled vitalism and ontobiology¹⁰. As pointed out by Chen¹¹, these anxieties are inextricably linked to those of *animacies*, of the (insensate) matter that animates cultural lives. Although *Stoner* is remarkable for its staging of these anxieties in relation to the ideals and concerns of classical humanism, it is equally interesting (in the time of its revival) for its corresponding anxieties about masculinity and capability, i.e. gender and disability.

4. Animacy and kalokagathia

It is in this way that *Stoner* prefigures posthumanist developments even as it is rooted in what Sloterdijk terms the final, artificial flowering of classical humanism. The aesthetics of this flowering provide existential justifications for the life of the novel's protagonist, but only because it is portrayed in *chiaoroscuero*, contrasted with tropes of sexism and ableism, i.e. of descriptions and assessments that discredit various other characters in the story.

This is of course an ancient and integrated part of humanist poetics. I take as my starting point the ancient Greek concept of *kalokagathia*, a physiological and moral ideal¹². Representing the unity of beauty, nobility and morality in human conduct, it also has an obverse side, i.e. "the idea of physical ugliness, human abnormality, deformity, illness and handicap which both is indicative of a corresponding character and mind and corresponds with social

degradation”¹³. What Weiler here terms *inverted kalokagathia* is inextricably linked with the political economy of ancient Greece, serving as a justification for the privileges of the upper classes and the oppression of outsider and slaves. It also has literary roots that stretch all the way back to the *Iliad*, where the character of Thersites, morally and physically ugly in equal measure, kicks off the action as the ideal foil for Odysseus¹⁴.

In recent years, the deployment of *kalokagathia* in literature (and in representational art more generally) has most originally been documented, explored, and critiqued within the field of interdisciplinary disability studies; it has been shown to be an all but constitutive part of the Western canon¹⁵ and the Hollywood canon¹⁶ alike. In other words, I will take here as a given the existence and ubiquity of moral characterization by way of physiological description: the phenomenon should be recognizable to anyone who has read or viewed *Richard III*, which perhaps more than any other single text exemplifies the narrative logic of *kalokagathia*, in which villainy and deformity are essentially two sides of the same ideological coin¹⁷.

Less obviously and a more interesting as a topic of inquiry is the relationship between *kalokagathia* and a deep-seated discomfort with animacy and embodiment as such. It is this relationship that runs as an discomfiting undercurrent throughout *Stoner*, providing the backdrop for its effects. This is *fear* of unruly life, of posthumanist, de-centered animacy. After the humanist tradition decays, chaos ensues. Under these circumstances, death is preferable.

Stoner rejects the possibility of an affirmative posthumanism before the event. This rejection is notably directed at disabled, animalized bodies. Edith Stoner has an unspecified disorder with symptoms that overlap, within the time period in which *Stoner* is set, with those of neurasthenia¹⁸¹⁹. This disorder manifests within the narrative primarily as an absence of *human agency*, as opposed to animal instinct. Particularly with regard to sex and intimacy,

Edith is unable to enter into a reciprocal, human relationship, displaying sexual arousal only when procreation is at issue, otherwise exhibiting the passivity of prey.

Edith's fleshly passivity is fundamentally different from that of inanimate matter, since it manifests as resistance. She becomes Stoner's antagonist because of her embodiment. In their home, her behavior is irrational but predictable, reminiscent in its compulsiveness and repetitive patterns of that of a trapped animal. Her motivations (beyond simple hostility and spite) remain opaque to Stoner, as no communication is possible in their non-reciprocal relationship. They engage with each other as with foreign bodies, forced into cohabitation by purely external constraints (though ultimately, of course, through Stoner's attempt at romantic courtship, his embrace of classical agency).

Hollis Lomax is another matter, as his intellectualism, his *ratio*, is not animalistic but posthumanist in the historical sense. He is a creature of Theory, which in *Stoner* equates with a lack of grounding in the empirical data, the true knowledge of literature. Lomax' embodiment is reminiscent of Richard III himself (only of one of many Shakespearean allusions in the text; Shakespeare is here a touchstone of classical humanism of Harold Bloom-like sanctity) – and a melodramatic character to boot.

The contrast between Lomax' mind and body is underscored by his "matinee idol" face, which appears to float, disembodied, in space. He has a vulnerable, traumatized body, and his intellectualism is fully explained by this body, by way of childhood social isolation and ostracism. It is not, however, a form of vulnerability that engenders sympathy or identification. Lomax rejects Stoner's overtures of friendship – since Lomax is as alien to human friendship as he is to human sexuality – and calcifies, nearly from the start of their acquaintanceship, as an antagonist.

The crucial scene for establishing these relationship is a late-night encounter between Lomax and Edith Stoner, following a faculty party. Lomax, having displayed his autobiographical self-justification to the small gathering of colleagues, kisses Edith, with Stoner observing them: “It was the chastest kiss Stoner had ever seen, and it seemed perfectly natural.” (100)

Being observed in this display of vulnerability is unacceptable to Lomax; his hostility is rooted in this encounter – an exercise in performative vulnerability, quite a ways removed from the rooted, everyday intimacy of normal human relationships. Edith accepts the kiss passively, much as she accepted Stoner’s romantic overtures some time earlier, the implication being that she is more suited for the chaste, deathly attentions of Lomax than the human emotional life of Stoner himself. Their marriage is proclaimed a failure fairly early in the narrative; Lomax serves partly as a vector for explaining why this had to be the case.

Despite, or possibly because of his un-integrated intellectualism, Lomax’ disabled body is also animalized. He is a Cartesian animal onto which a strange, machinistic *ratio* has been carelessly grafted. His reactions are construed as *instinctive responses* in the vein of flight-flight; he belongs, along with Edith Stoner, to the class of people who are intrinsically unable to align with the humanistic tradition and its precepts for, quite simply, being human. *Stoner’s* status as an elegiac novel stems from its implication that Lomax and Edith Stoner have a greater claim on the future than does William Stoner. His humanism, which is a spiritual *praxis* anchored in a tradition that is, if not dead, then certainly dying, cannot exert power either in his place of work or his family home. Lomax’ rudderless instrumentalism allows him to claim supremacy in the academic hierarchy, while Edith Stoner’s instinctual ruthlessness lets her claim her daughter and determine her daughter’s trajectory as a woman determined by external qualities, lacking a center.

5. Precepts of a dying humanism

Posthumanist thought contains temporal figurations that can be conceived as somewhat paradoxical. Our present day (a fuzzy determination at best, delimited perhaps by the end of the Cold War, perhaps by the upheavals of the 1960s, perhaps by the contemporaneous growth of digital technologies) is construed as peculiarly posthuman, while at the same time posthumanist tendencies are traced, in a deconstructive vein, to the origins of classical humanism itself. In terms of justification, the first approach serves to *actualize* posthumanism, while the second *legitimizes* it. The approaches are not intrinsically incompatible, but they generate a considerable amount of tension both on the descriptive and teleological level. If the posthuman stance is peculiar to this historical moment, its relevance to historical readings must necessarily be diminished, while emphasis placed on its deep historical genealogy will align it, rather, with a mere reinterpretation of the humanist tradition as it is already defined (and possibly also understood).

Stoner takes a clear, even dichotomous position on this issue, presuming a definite end to a definitely pre-existing tradition. The First World War signals the ultimate demise of something that may have been on the wane, but still, like its embodiment Archer Sloane, had a pulse and kept breathing. William Stoner was initiated into the mysteries of this tradition, though he perhaps never proceeds to the level of enlightenment (a point that nevertheless needs to be discussed in greater detail).

The simple dichotomous approach is dramatized by the narrative; nevertheless, the simple act of historicizing the narrative and its moment of publication serves to complicate the analysis. *Stoner* was published in the 1960s, and as such it is necessarily marked by the distance between the time in which it is set and the time during which it was written. There can be no answer to the counterfactual question of what *Stoner* would have looked like, were it written in the interwar period, and yet this observation cannot obscure the embeddedness of *Stoner* in its actually existing history. The role of the 1960s in the genealogy of gender as well as

disability politics inevitably highlights the novel's reactionary slant; it prefigures posthumanism's troublesome relationship²⁰ with these categories by way of a lament, an invocation of the barbarians at the gate.

The relevance of these prefigurations to posthumanist thought can chiefly be found in their potential for articulating posthumanism's affirmative potential. Strikingly, *Stoner's* aesthetic (repeatedly and emphatically embraced by critics upon the republication of the novel) is one of negativity to the point of engaging mainly with thanatopolitics. Solon's maxim – that no man should be deemed happy until he is dead – is applied, in *Stoner*, in a way that cannot wholly be described as ironic, but is certainly not intended affirmatively. William Stoner's life can perhaps, and generously, be deemed *authentic*, but the value of his authenticity can only be authenticated, so to speak, relative to a framework of assessment that is consigned by the novel to the irretrievable past. As such the novel erects a memorial that is inert, lifeless, and ultimately archival – to be retrieved, if it is at all to be revived, only once the moribund tradition has been miraculously revived. (If there is intellectual kinship to be found in *Stoner*, it is with Allan rather than Harold Bloom.)

There is no embraceable vibrancy in the humanities, no vitalism, because no such attributes can be found in a posthumanist universe, one in which the vibrant matter of leaky bodies serves to detract, rather than augment. By this reasoning, *Stoner* actually serves to entomb its ideological implications along with its protagonist; it lights the funeral pyre of humanism and stays just long enough to see the embers go out.

6. Coda: Elegiac lessons for posthumanist thought

Examined a half-century after the book's publication, the relational architecture in *Stoner* appears reactionary, inviting, as such, a plenitude of critical and revisionist readings. The potential foci of such readings include representations of various stereotypical dichotomies

such as masculinity/femininity, ablebodiedness/disability, and moral purity/impurity, all three of which are explicitly and implicitly interlinked in the narrative. This list is not exhaustive, but it provides a starting point, and a way of approaching the underlying question of late humanist / posthumanist value systems.

First, a reappraisal of Edith Stoner might begin with examining her character as an expression of four classical tropes of villainous femininity. She is a) void of sexual pleasure, or, rather of the ability to respond to and augment Stoner's sexuality; b) intellectually shallow and passive, with no interests outside the domestic sphere; c) physically lazy and therefore unable to tend even to her domestic duties; d) materialistic and covetous, forcing Stoner into debt. All four qualities are variations on the same theme, that of passivity and incapability – though, crucially, animalistic rather than inanimate.

Second, that theme reappears in connection with Hollis Lomax and Charles Walker, both of whom exhibit a similar mixture of physical and intellectual incapability, and in Lomax' case the same absence of authentic sexuality. The three characters are entangled in a matrix of femininity and disability, construed as morally toxic and detrimental to the fundamental masculine (farmer's) values related to work and production.

Those values are of course deeply entwined with the production of both femininity and disability in the industrial age. In the case of women, the segregation and gendering of public and private spheres is only one factor in the devaluation and masking of women's work. As regards disability, industrialization has been articulated as a primary cause of the linkage between disability and lack of productivity²¹.

The moral value of work, i.e. measurable and recognized work, is thus deeply embedded in the capitalist system which generates the (de)valuations of female embodiment and bodily impairment that subsequently becomes codified as womanhood and disability. Being a

woman and being a disabled person in this system equates with unproductivity and passivity in an economic sense, attributes that are viewed as direct consequences of biologically essential properties rather than social arrangements.

There is significant differentiation between physical and intellectual labor, however, and although the exclusion of women and disabled people from both spheres of activity is comparable, the justification of this exclusion rests on different conceptions of biological incapability. Whereas physical labor can be seen as a scalar activity on which discrete boundaries are imposed (a worker must be capable of completing a factory shift, whether eight, ten or twelve hours), intellectual labor requires qualities that are not divisible, e.g. a capacity for disinterestedness and universalism – essential components of *ratio*.

Disabled people and women are thus conceived as physically inferior by degrees, but morally and intellectually inferior in kind. Female bodies and disabled bodies, which by comparison with able, male bodies suffer from a biological deficit that in turn gives grounds for narcissism and intellectual particularism²². In *Stoner*, these dual threats to the academy – the last bastion of humanistic *ratio* – are carried out by way of a pincer maneuver. The pram in the hall is mirrored by the wheelchair at the gate.

For posthumanist thinking, the primary *lesson* from *Stoner* is that the anxieties that play out in the beleaguered citadel are inherently linked to the Foucauldian values of *productivity* and *control*, particularly over the inanimate, “pure” matter that is malleable through intellectual work. The leakage of animate matter through the vectors of gender and disability amount to an infection of a sphere that may no longer be vital or generative by dint of its own resources, but which could nevertheless be preserved as a monument to itself, an archival necropolis, were it not for the breakdown of the safeguards of the (late) humanist order.

The challenge for posthumanist thinking is what implicit valuations of productivity and ability remains embedded in its assumptions. Although not *a priori* gendered or otherwise marked, such valuations are inevitably enmeshed in modes of embodiment, begging the question of what, if any, standards are applied. The decentering of specific conceptions of humanity, which remains a core item on the posthumanist agenda, does not necessarily entail a decentering of valuation hierarchies. Posthumanism remains split between approaches to the problem of hierarchies, with one line of inquiry leading to reappraisals of the members of marginal categories and their prototypical qualities and attributes, and another, more radical line leading to the questioning of the valuation of particular qualities as such. Neither lines have so far lead to satisfactory forms of affirmative posthumanism, however. The first risks a reestablishment of old hierarchies with slightly shifted boundaries, while the second leads, in many cases, to fuzzy holism.

Stoner provides no answers; its moral imagination is filled with longing and ruins, not plans and blueprints. It simply demonstrates the *need* for an affirmative direction in posthumanist thinking, by demonstrating, albeit with considerable aesthetic power, the sterility and thanatopolitical direction in which late humanism believes itself to be headed. These tendencies predate (and prefigure) many key developments in posthumanist thought, providing it with targets – thought not, of course, the means by which to reach them.

Notes

¹ John Williams, *Stoner* (New York: Viking, 1965), 285.

² Mel Chen, *Animacies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 1.

³ Chen, 2.

⁴ Julia Kristeva et al., "Cultural Crossings of Care: An Appeal to the Medical Humanities.," *Medical Humanities* 44, no. 1 (September 2018): 55–58, <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2017-011263>; Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt / by Julia Kristeva ; Translated by Ross Guberman, European Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁵ Cary. Wolfe, *Before the Law : Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁶ Wolfe.

⁷ Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?, What Is Posthumanism*, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (London: Polity Press, 2013).

⁸ J C Chatel and R Peele, "CONCEPT OF NEURASTHENIA," *International Journal of Psychiatry* 9 (1971): 36–49.

⁹ Peter Sloterdijk, "Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the Letter on Humanism," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27, no. 1 (2009): 302.

¹⁰ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1991).

¹¹ Peter Sloterdijk, "Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the Letter on Humanism," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27, no. 1 (2009): 12–28.

¹² Stephen G. Miller, *Arete : Greek Sports from Ancient Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

¹³ Ingomar Weiler, "Inverted Kalokagathia," *Slavery & Abolition* 23, no. 2 (2010): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/714005237>.

¹⁴ N. Postlethwaite, "Thersites in the Iliad," *Greece and Rome* 35, no. 02 (October 7, 1988): 123–36, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017383500033027>; W. G. Thalmann, "Thersites: Comedy, Scapegoats, and Heroic Ideology in the Iliad," *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974-)* 118 (1988): 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/284159>.

¹⁵ Sharon L Snyder and David T Mitchell, *Narrative Prosthesis : Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse, Corporealities* (Ann Arbor; [Great Britain]: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

¹⁶ Martin F Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Disability in the Movies* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ P Rhodes, "Physical Deformity of Richard III," *British Medical Journal* 2, no. 6103 (1977): 24–31; Isabel Tulloch, "Richard III: A Study in Medical Misrepresentation," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 102, no. 8 (2009): 315–23.

¹⁸ Chen, *Animacies*.

¹⁹ Simon Wessely, "Old Wine in New Bottles: Neurasthenia and 'ME,'" *Psychological Medicine* 20, no. 01 (1990): 35–53, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0033291700013210>.

²⁰ Dan Goodley, Rebecca Lawthom, and Katherine Runswick Cole, "Posthuman Disability Studies," *Subjectivity* 7, no. 4 (2014): 342–61, <https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2014.15>.

²¹ Michael Oliver and Colin Barnes, *The New Politics of Disablement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Brendan Gleeson, "Domestic Space and Disability in Nineteenth-Century Melbourne, Australia," *Journal of Historical Geography* 27, no. 2 (2001): 223–40; Deborah A Stone, *The Disabled State, Health, Society, and Policy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).

²² Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory, Corporealities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).