The posthuman is a new term for an old problem, one that haunts the humanist tradition from whenever or wherever we think that tradition began. One iconic (Renaissance) humanist text is Pico della Mirandola’s Oration on the Dignity of Man (c. 1486). There God delegates to “man” responsibility for his own destiny:

Therefore He [God] took up man, a work of indeterminate form; and placing him at the midpoint of the world, He spoke to him as follows:

“We have given to thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, possess as thine own the seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shalt desire. A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by Us. In conformity with thy free judgement, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. I have placed thee at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul’s reason into the higher natures which are divine.” (4–5)

Humanist discourse here is masculine (God speaks to Adam) and hierarchical in its ordering of species (with animals relegated to the status of “brutes”). Humanity, represented by Adam, is God’s special creation, placed “at the center of the world,” master of all it surveys, free to “sculpt [itself] into whatever shape [it] dost prefer.” However, with this freedom comes responsibility as well...
as risk, for God’s special creatures are hybrid, shapeless, even vacuous. If the human from the perspective of the posthuman means mutable, porous, lacking stable species definition, and therefore actually or potentially continuous with objects, machines, animals—or in della Mirandola’s pejorative language, “brutes”—then we might conclude along with N. Katharine Hayles that “we have always been posthuman” (291), or at least that the human condition has always and everywhere been attended by the posthuman condition.

I emphasize the qualification “attended” to signal, for the moment, the idea that the humanist project might not yet be over. That project can be understood as a dynamic and ongoing process of composition, de-composition, and re-composition. It is a process that can be read into della Mirandola’s text. One humanist credo (the freedom to fashion ourselves) decomposes into vacuity, while another (ethical agency and responsibility) is recomposed in the choices we make to fashion ourselves in an upward or downward direction (towards our “better selves” or our brutishness). We might further recompose the ethical humanism present in the notion of a “better self” by adopting a more ethically enlightened language about animals and humans-as-animals, or at least by acknowledging that the anthropomorphic projection of animals as brutes might say more about humans than it does about animals.

The composition, de-composition, and re-composition of della Mirandola’s humanism encapsulates in miniature the humanist tradition that Halliwell and Mousley have argued to be a “pluralistic and self-critical tradition that folds in and over itself, provoking a series of questions and problems rather than necessarily providing consolation or edification” (16). “Posthumanism” will be taken in this essay as the most recent incentive to recapitulate humanism and the human. Posthumanism is from this perspective in continuity with humanism. And insofar as humanism provokes metaphysical questions, then posthumanism does likewise: what, in our own time, is left of the human? What is left of the subject? What is left of the interiority of the subject? In Minima Moralia (1951), Theodor Adorno blamed “organized culture,” and particularly the popularization of “depth-psychology,” for cutting off “people’s last possibility of experiencing themselves” (65). Adorno was writing in the 1940s and 1950s, but the further penetration of human life by template selves, technocracy, bureaucracy, popular psychology, and commodified lifestyles challenges us to recapitulate “the subject” once again.

This version of posthumanism, as the recapitulation of a continually recapitulating humanism, returns metaphysics to critical discourse after its displacement by epistemology. Not that metaphysics should then displace epistemology tit-for-tat, for as Roy Brassier has argued: “just as epistemology without metaphysics is empty, metaphysics without epistemology is blind” (280). Nevertheless, if we have been mainly interested in how truth is
constructed (through discourse and ideology), and if we have tended to empty out the metaphysical content of the subject by speaking of subjectivity as an “effect” or a position within a discourse, then the challenge of the posthuman is to say what we really mean by the subject, or to resist getting too metaphysical, to say what we mean, and want to mean by the subject, now. I emphasize “want” not to indicate a laissez-faire voluntarism but care. The provocation of posthumanism, as a recapitulation of humanism, might be to make us have a care for the human, including a care for what we mean by it, for fear that to become fully post-human might take us beyond the point of caring. And I emphasize “now” for two reasons: if the human is multiplicitous, then which bits of that multiplicity do we think it is important to safeguard now? And which bits do we currently think may be, or have been, durable?

There is another version of posthumanism, however—a more iconoclastic one—that will at times be invoked in what follows. In this version, the posthuman does not merely attend the human as a provocation to say (again) what we mean by the human, but supplants it. Posthuman here spells post-metaphysical. In his proto-posthumanist book *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1987), Jean Baudrillard argues that “the religious, metaphysical or philosophical definition of being [has] given way to an operational definition in terms of the genetic code (DNA) and cerebral organization. . . . We are in a system where there is no more soul, no more metaphor of the body” (19). If, in Baudrillard’s terms, the metaphors of “body” and “soul” have lost their potency to describe the parameters of selfhood, then there can be “no more individuals, but only potential mutants” (51). In this version of the posthuman, tropes of exile and alienation are no longer applicable. To King Lear’s angst-ridden question, “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (1.4.212), one post-metaphysical posthumanist answer would be, in Bruno Latour’s phrase, an “(x)-morphism” (qtd. in Wolfe xxiii). For zealous post-metaphysical posthumanists such as Henry S. Turner, posthumanism moves us decisively beyond “the subject,” that “fatigued philosophical category that we really should allow to rest” (205). Using life writing as its support, this essay will favor “Type A” posthumanism (as recapitulation of humanism) over “Type B” (post-metaphysical posthumanism), for reasons that will become clear.

**LIFE WRITING/THE WRITING OF THE LIVED**

My preference for “Type A” posthumanism prompts me to suggest that, thus far, this essay has been “heady” stuff: cerebral and abstract, where abstract means analysis conducted at the level of concepts distant from “life.” I need to “get a life,” or at least the writing of one, since it is here that we might be afforded an experience of the human (and posthuman) as lived, sensuously
embodied categories. The particular “life” I want to “get” is Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* (1989), because Hoffman’s autobiography is, I will argue, an autobiography whose literariness fully and provocatively communicates this experience.

*Lost in Translation* is the story of Hoffman’s and her Jewish family’s emigration from Poland (in 1959) to Canada and subsequently the US. It has been described by Danuta Zadworna Fjellestad as the “first ‘postmodern’ autobiography written in English by an émigré from a European Communist country” (136). As a story of exile, Hoffman’s autobiography plays out, on various levels, the humanist/posthumanist dynamic (outlined above) of composition/de-composition/re-composition, with Hoffman’s self and her inherited understandings of the human “lost” in their “translation” into another culture, but eventually—and tentatively—re-found.

The issue of referentiality in autobiography has been much debated, making appeals like the one just made to autobiography as providing unmediated access to lived experience problematic. The “lived” may not be transparently present in “life writing”—may again be “lost” in “translation” into writing—but certain basic conditions of human life, such as the capacity to feel, arguably survive this translation. It is difficult, in other words, to imagine living without feeling, and difficult therefore to imagine writing or reading a life devoid of emotion (where this occurs, we usually invoke repression as the reason). Events become “experiences,” we might say, when feeling is added to them. The transformation of event into experience is so widespread in human culture as to cause shock when it does not occur (when an event such as the murder of a child does not cause an emotional reaction, for example). In autobiography, feeling is conventionally specified to an individual who prolongs that specification for the duration of the autobiographical account. But this specification also often assumes, and depends upon, a commonality, for autobiography is an invitation to its readers to experience kinship with the autobiographer across the gulfs of time, history, cultural difference, and any of the other particularities that mark the “I” off from the “you” now being asked to find common ground with that autobiographical “I.” The basis for this bond is that we feel, or approximate feeling, what the autobiographer felt because these feelings are the specification to the individual (and individual’s culture) of feelings that are also primary and universal (hope, joy, sadness, fear, disgust, surprise, and so on). While fictional first-person narrative might prompt a similar kind of engagement, the knowledge that certain emotions were lived out (in Hoffman’s case, those of the trauma of the aftermath of the Holocaust, for example) distinguishes the simulated “as ifs” of fiction from the reconstructed “as ifs” of autobiography—and thus becomes an invitation to get on intimate terms with a real-life stranger, an invitation to recognize
general feelings that are simultaneously personalized. However, if such a perspective smacks of an overconfident foundationalism, with feeling as its support, then we need to bring the discomposing challenge of posthumanism back into play, by saying that if autobiography reaches out to a reader to enter some shared sense of human-ness, then that wanted human solidarity is often compensatory: it may be wanted and needed precisely because such solidarity was absent, denied, or threatened in the autobiographer’s own life. And it may be denied once more by the stranger who reads you and feels little of your pain, joy, suffering, love, or anger, either because the feelings are overspecified to the individual, or because of the way those feelings are written. Even though you recognize the feeling I have of sadness, my expression of sadness may just not strike a chord with you.

There is no guarantee that the more “literary” the communication of emotion is, the greater the chance that it will resonate with readers. Nevertheless, literary texts and by extension literary autobiographies have often been prized for the presumed quality of their emotionally expressive communication, a point that will become increasingly central to my argument, as I move beyond a “degree zero” conception of humanity to consider, using Hoffman, what makes us “fully” human, what makes for authentic individual and collective self-realization, and what makes autobiographical narrative a uniquely powerful affective experience.

LOST IN TRANSLATION?

The recapitulation of the universal (as feeling) is written into the structure of Hoffman’s book. The usual structure, and usually in this sequence, is:

a) present-tense recollections of past events or moments: “It is April 1959 . . .” (3); “I am lying in bed . . .” (5); “It’s the middle of a sun-filled day . . .” (6); “We are in Montreal” (99); 

b) recollection of the feeling, often (but not always) of the pain of loss/leave-taking, which we are asked to recognize, and which accompanied the recollected event/moment, as for example, at the very beginning of the book:

It is April 1959, I’m standing at the railing of the Batory’s upper deck, and I feel that my life is ending. I’m looking out at the crowd that has gathered on the shore to see the ship’s departure from Gydnia—a crowd that, all of a sudden, is irrevocably on the other side—and I want to break out, run back, run toward the familiar excitement, the waving hands, the exclamations. We can’t be leaving all this behind—but we are. I am thirteen years old, and we are emigrating. It’s a notion of such crushing, definitive finality that to me it might as well mean the end of the world. (3)
Here and elsewhere, Hoffman is articulate in her recall. The recollected feelings may not be those experienced by the thirteen-year old, which may have been more inchoate. Recollection here is an act of re-collecting—of retrospectively making sense of—those bits of the past that may have been originally experienced as confusing and traumatic. Hoffman is giving names to feelings that she might not originally have had a name for. She is speaking on behalf of her past self. And she is therefore also making the past feeling—of loss—available to the reader:

c) expansive reflection on aspects of the human condition prompted by her recollected experiences, as in:

\[\ldots\] no geometry of the landscape, no haze in the air, will live in us as intensely as the landscapes that we saw as the first, and to which we gave ourselves wholly, without reservations. Later, of course, we learn how to be more parsimonious: how to parse ourselves into constituent elements, how to be less indiscriminate and foolish in our enthusiasms. But if we’re not to risk falling into that other absurd, in which we become unpeeled from all the objects of the world, and they all seem equally two-dimensional and stale, we must somehow preserve the memory and the possibility of our childish, absurd affections. Insofar as we retain the capacity for attachment, the energy of desire that draws us toward the world and makes us want to live within it, we’re always returning. All we have to draw on is that first potent furnace, the uncomparing, ignorant love, the original heat and hunger for the forms of the world, for the here and now. (74–75)

The passage from the particular to the universal is hardly ever smooth, as Hoffman wrestles with cultural difference and the apparent un-translatability of universals across cultures. But, as we shall see, she never gives up on the attempt to convert “me” into “we,” to draw the reader into a collective humanity.

It is not only cultural and individual difference, however, which thwarts the easy assumption of universals, but the failure of human beings to recognize them, let alone honor and cultivate them. If it is true, as Hoffman urges in the passage above, that “we” are all born with the in-built capacity for attachment—for love—then the obscene conditions that human beings have created for other human beings scarcely nurture that capacity. Hoffman grew up as a Jew in Poland in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Although, according to Sarah Casteel Phillips, “the Holocaust is always confined to the margins of [Hoffman’s] narrative” (293), and the repressed trauma of its post-memory unconsciously projected, later in the narrative, onto Canada, Hoffman nevertheless tells us early on that her aunt was thought to have died in a gas chamber, “among those who had to dig their own graves,” and that “all the other
members of my mother’s family died as well” (7). Nor did anti-Semitism end when World War II ended: “My father,” she writes, “comes home one day reporting on a fistfight he got into when someone on the street said to him that ‘the best thing Hitler did was to eliminate the Jews’” (32). Hoffman’s response, learned from her family, is to take pride in her Jewishness and to keep faith with the “simple affirmation of justice, of rightness, of reason” that “Jews are human the way other people are human” (33).

When so many human beings have been denied the means of supporting human life at its most basic (life, food, water, shelter, affective support, freedom from pain, torture), it seems a decadently immoral luxury to make the argument of cultural relativism, that “of course” the human is always and everywhere a mere cultural and discursive construct. The duller truth is that we surely know human beings well enough to be able to judge the physical, mental, and emotional conditions under which they either flourish or perish. The bleaker point that accompanies this homespun truth, however, is that these conditions have so often been ignored. We ignore them because humans are also inhuman. Insofar as the term inhuman still manages to signal a morally shocked response to the “dark and barbaric feelings” (33) that result in such atrocities as the Holocaust, it appeals to our better selves. But “posthuman” raises the stakes. It puts added pressure on the human. Will there come a time—or perhaps that time is now—when we are so unfeelingly post-human as no longer even to blink an eye at our inhumanity? Given this possibility, how can we rescue/recompose the human in the post-human?

HOFFMAN’S METAPHYSICS OF ATTACHMENT AND DIS-ATTACHMENT

Despite anti-Semitism, the rule of Stalinist Russia over Poland after World War II, and growing up in what she describes as a “lumpen apartment in Cracow, squeezed into three rudimentary rooms with four other people, surrounded by squabbles, dark political rumblings, memories of wartime suffering, and daily struggle of existence,” Hoffman still managed to make an “Eden” out of her environment (5). In keeping with the title of the first section of the book (“Paradise”), Hoffman uses religious discourse to describe the miracle or “wonder” of “what you can make a paradise of” (5). The wonder of it is rooted in Hoffman’s metaphysics of attachment, in our preordained urge to give ourselves “wholly” (75) to whatever bit of the world we happen, pace Heidegger, to be thrown into. This is the universalized urge at the heart of Hoffman’s book, one which redeems the human as a positive term once again (for the human is always being redeemed from its others: the inhuman, the monstrous, the barbaric). For Hoffman, the strength of the urge to attach can override inhospitable or hostile conditions, but the urge is
nevertheless challenged—to the breaking point—by those conditions. If the conditions are appalling, then the paradise of connectedness can turn into the hell of alienation.

Hoffman’s redemption narrative is more complicated than this, however, as she suggests that the “fall” into dis-attachment is not solely the result of the failure of environmental conditions, but also the result of maturation, as we grow out of the intensity of our first childhood attachments. However, in an ideal world, we would not leave these entirely behind, but exercise judgment about what to attach to. Pre-reflective childhood feeling and post-childhood critical reflection would harmonize.

Hoffman writes, or tries to write, this unity into a life-text that is at once intensely reflective, thought-full, and powerfully evocative of prereflective “moments of being,” as Virginia Woolf once described them (81). These experiences are recollected in the present tense, and describe blissful experiences of sensuous immersion in the here and now (or “there and then”):

I am walking home from school slowly, playing a game in which it’s forbidden to step on the cracks between the slabstone squares of the pavement. The sun is playing its game of lines and shadows. Nothing happens. There is nothing but this moment, in which I am walking towards home, walking in time. But suddenly, time pierces me with its sadness. This moment will not last, a sliver of time vanishes. Soon, I’ll be home, and then this, this newness will be the past, I think, and time seems to escape behind me, like an invisible current being sucked into an invisible vortex. How can this be, that this fullness, this me on the street, this moment which is perfectly abundant, will be gone? (16)

This passage can be made vertiginously complex because in it we can see Hoffman consciously reflecting upon a reconstructed reflection upon a reconstructed pre-reflective moment. The “exile” which reflection and reconstruction bring with them compromises the paradise to which Hoffman longs to return both herself and us as readers, but not to the extent of obliterating a lyricism that presses itself upon us despite (or perhaps because of) our own critically reflective capacities. Moreover, as evanescent and saturated with nostalgia as these reconstructed moments of joyous oneness are, Hoffman never abandons the childish imperative to find their equivalents in the present. The book’s concluding epiphany—“I am here now,” referring to the US from which she had for so long felt dis-attached—is one such moment when the Polish past is no longer the sole signifier of home. The US, or those bits of the US she inhabits, become home to her, and so finally compatible with her never-deserted urge to attach.

This urge informs Hoffman’s writing of the lives of others, as much as it informs the writing of her own life. Writing the self and writing others are
of course inseparable—how can one life not intersect, in one way or another, with others? But such inseparability is conventionally heavily modified in favor of the autobiographer by virtue of the fact that others become present in the writing of the self because of their significance to the autobiographer. Moreover, the possibilities for interiority and introspection to which autobiography gives rise mean that the lives and selves of others may become shadowy affairs, absorbed into an internalized emotional landscape that reinforces the over-specification of feeling to the individual referred to earlier. Add to this the apparent insurmountability of cultural difference, and the gap between self and other further widens. It is Hoffman’s urge to attach, however, which drives her attempt to establish intimacies across the differences of individually and culturally inflected consciousnesses, and which impacts upon the way she presents the lives and selves of others. For Hoffman, living cultural and individualized differences is not the same as an abstract knowledge of such differences, because living them is affectively charged, is upsetting and frustrating, as well as, sometimes, enticing. When cultural differences are played out face-to-face, they become “personalized” at the very same moment as they intensify the issue of how meaningful person-to-person contact is possible.

Hoffman can quite easily treat other people and herself at several removes by reflecting in an intellectually distanced way upon, for example, the “philosophies of cultural relativity” which have grown up in “our time of mass migrations and culture collisions.” “It’s no wonder,” she continues, “that we have devised a whole metaphysics for the subjects of difference and otherness” (209). This is the quasi-Olympian perspective, one which she maintains even when describing her “closest [American] friends”: “My misfortune is to see the grid of general assumptions drawn all over particular personalities, to notice the subjection to collective ideology where I should only see the free play of subjectivity” (203). The desired closeness of friendship is here replaced by the distance of cultural analysis, indicated by the emotionally detached word “notice.” And with the perspective of social determinism deployed here comes the withdrawal of the terms “person” and “personalities,” those singular human/humanist entities with whom friendship might have seemed possible: “in the midst of a discussion, I cease seeing the face of one person, and start throwing myself against the wall of an invisible, impregnable, collective force” (203). Hoffman’s writing of the lives of others—of her “friends”—might at this point be described as leaning towards the post-metaphysical posthumanist: cultural difference, it seems, is unbridgeable, making person-to-person contact impossible and causing the human to be as “lost in translation” as Hoffman felt herself to be. How under these circumstances can you write humanistically about “people”? Or of oneself as a “person” when subjection to collective ideology can equally be applied to that self?
“after the human”—post-metaphysical, “post-personal” life writing, life writing without a subject—is cipher writing, the writing of the operation of “the-culture-in-my-friends” (203) and the culture/s in herself.

But the Olympian perspective is only taken so far in a text whose first loyalty is to the sensuous particulars of autobiography. Down on the ground, at the level of those concrete lived realities which conventional autobiography hopes to re-capture, things feel different. Hoffman herself records the failure of abstract perspective to deal with the immediacy and urgency of living out difference. Of her relationship with her American friends, she writes: “We could declare each other products of different cultures—as we, of course, are—and leave it, respectfully, at that. But that would leave us separate and impermeable—something that is easier to accept with impersonal entities like class, or gender, or country than with a fellow human being clamoring to be understood” (210).

Hoffman does not give up on “people,” then, or the possibility of forming intimacies with people, qua people, across cultural differences. At times Hoffman might look as though she is ready to substitute closeness for analysis of the cultural specificity of closeness, for the way closeness differs from culture to culture. But she fights what she calls the “hobgoblin of abstraction” (105), which would turn closeness purely into an object of inquiry rather than that sensuous, affectively charged particular which was part of her everyday lived experience. Instead of remaining in the domain of abstraction, where the experience of friendship is traded in for an understanding of “collective ideology,” she gets mad. “Immigrant rage” grips her (203). And while this rage is propelled by the fear that she may have “to yield too much of my own ground” to establish “common ground” with her friends (205), rage is important in another way. If rage is raw emotion—one of the primary emotions, according to some neuroscientists—then raw emotion might be the way to breach the wall of cultural difference and “collective ideology,” especially given Hoffman’s perception that most if not all of the Canadians and Americans she encounters are lacking in “human-ness” because lacking in emotional vitality. The rage that involves “throwing myself against the wall” of the “invisible, impregnable, collective force” of (US) ideology is a way not only of preserving her own ground, but of establishing a common ground which (she thinks/feels) is, or should be, authentically common and trans-cultural.

**AUTHENTICITY AND FEELING**

Feeling is at the heart—is the heart—of Hoffman’s autobiography (and of autobiography in general, if it is accepted that autobiography is the recollection of affectively charged events). For Hoffman, however, the “common
ground" of emotion is a desideratum rather than a given: it should be foundational but can decompose. If feeling is Hoffman’s touchstone, then she has to keep testing as well as protecting this touchstone, which had a local habitation and name in the shape of her mother. For Hoffman’s mother, there is a democracy in sentiment:

my mother, who is worried about my future as a pianist, writes to no less a figure than Ben-Gurion, a cult hero who is also “one of ours,” [i.e., Jewish] to inquire whether I’ll be able to get piano lessons if we come to Israel. This is the kind of gesture she knows how to make; the gesture of a person who does not have enough power or standing to go through the normal channels of influence but who can cut through the rules and appeal to some grand personage’s ordinary humanity, to what’s similar in everyone. “Just remember, everyone is human, everyone has the same feelings,” she often tells me. “You should never be afraid of anybody.” (85)

In “Paradise,” such comforting maternal wisdom is relatively secure. Pre-reflective certainty about human nature and identity is one of the things that makes paradise “paradise.” But in “Exile” and “The New World,” such certainties threaten to unravel:

The human mean is located in a different place here [the US], and qualities like adventurousness, or cleverness, or shyness are measured along a different scale and mapped within a different diagram. You can’t transport human meanings whole from one culture to another any more than you can transliterate a text. (175)

Hoffman partly embraces the cultural relativism invoked here and elsewhere because the paradise of certainty can become stagnant. But Hoffman will not follow the path of cultural relativism to the point where the value of difference in and for itself is unassailable. Her desire to discover the authentically human is too strong for her to be content with a laissez-faire embrace of difference which discards the difficult task of evaluating people and cultures. And once again the touchstone for this evaluation is emotion and emotional expressiveness. Cultural difference gets to Hoffman above all because the difference, as she experiences it, between Polish and North American cultures is the emotional extravagance and vitality of the former contrasted with what she perceives to be the more muted, sometimes barren, emotional landscape of the latter. Whatever “fund of human experience” she and her Polish family “may represent,” she feels a “ferociousness about protecting it” against the danger that they might morph into “cheerful suburbanites, with hygienic smiles and hygienic feelings” (146–47). The suburbanites she has in mind are Vancouver’s, the family’s first place of residence in North America, and a city described by Hoffman as one in which the “pulse of life seems to beat at
low pressure” (135). The binaries between impulsiveness and restraint, vitality and deadness, intensity and torpor, depth and shallowness, the raw and the hygienic, play out across a variety of other experiences and relationships in Canada and then the US.

Of her relationship with her first American—Texan—boyfriend, for example, she writes: “our ideas of love are so different” (188). When he says “I love you, Eva,” she hears “an oddly disembodied phrase,” for what (she thinks) he wants is “an ethereal, sacred love . . . a meeting of the spirits” (190). What is lacking for her in this overly spiritualized love is “the vigor and ease of friendship.” They “learn to read each other as one learns to decipher hieroglyphics,” but “we never meet in that quick flash of recognition, the intuitive click which comes from knowing the play and surfaces of each other’s personalities” (190). Difference entices—“I fall in love with otherness” (186), she writes—but difference also frustrates her desire for intimacy and openness: “I want us to say everything to each other, in the freedom of our camaraderie. But I know that he’s afraid, and I begin to restrain my gestures” (188).

It is possible that Hoffman here and elsewhere is reaching for an impossible ideal: the intensity of erotic love combined with the ease of friendship; the meeting of minds, hearts, spirits, and bodies across differences that are known intuitively in a “quick flash of recognition”; the enticing adventure of otherness joined to the comfort of the familiar; the fullest possible panoply of intimacies in a relationship that also honors the “ineradicable separateness” of the other person (189). In a way, this idealization—this fantasy of fullness and multifacetedness—is the natural outcome of the placement of feeling at the center of the writing of the self. Once this move has been made, and used as a questionable but never discarded touchtone for value, then one consequence is for Hoffman to become something of a connoisseur or aesthete of the emotions. Her mother’s folkloristic wisdom—“everyone has the same feelings”—states a fact (as she sees it) baldly and simply, in the form of an aphorism. Hoffman is her mother’s daughter insofar as she takes this portmanteau aphorism into all of her relationships, at the same time as she plays variations on it, so that “everyone has the same feelings” develops into a refined appreciation of the different shades and intensities of feeling that it might be possible to experience with a friend and/or lover.

The standard Hoffman sets for language is similarly high. She wants to be able to think and feel fully and richly in language, and for language to be expressive of the intricacies as well as the impulsiveness of thought and feeling. When an anecdote, told in her second language of US English, fails to amuse, she feels humiliated, for “telling a joke” she writes, “is like doing a linguistic pirouette” and laughter is “the lightning rod of play, the eroticism of
conversation.” For the moment, she concludes, “I’ve lost my ability to make the sparks fly” (118). This angle on language looks at first as though it might be absorbed into an earlier series of reflections, where she writes of having become a reluctant “avatar of structuralist wisdom” (107), for whom “the signifier has become severed from the signified” because “the words I learn don’t stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue” (106). From this standpoint, jokes (notoriously) don’t translate from one language into another because they depend heavily on culturally embedded assumptions, coterie codes, the rapid-fire of idiomatic speech, and the rest. Hoffman follows the cultural constructionist’s perspective on language to a (significant) degree, but it ultimately collides with her expressive theory of language whose energizing principle is qualitative rather than descriptive and goes well beyond any neutral account of how language shapes human identity. Hoffman’s persistent concern is with how well language expresses us, as well as how well we express it, and how richly it allows us to know and realize ourselves. To say that laughter is the “eroticism of conversation” is to make a point, once again, about the possibilities for intimacy—for flirtatious intimacy, in this case—which as language users it is within our capability to exploit. When the resources of language are diminished, or unavailable to us, we are diminished. If language is coterminous with being, then the quality of our being in language matters (or should matter). For Hoffman, those successful immigrants, past and present, who only inhabit their success story, exist in an impoverished communicative and ontological condition:

Theirs is an immigrant success story, and that’s the story of their own lives that they accept. But perhaps, if they had the words just to say what they feel, something different might pour out, an elusive complaint of an elusive ailment. For insofar as meaning is interhuman and comes from the thickness of human connections and how richly you are known, these successful immigrants have lost some of their meaning. In their separateness and silence, their wisdom—what they used to know in an intimate way, on their skin—is stifled and it dries up a little. . . . Sitting upright in their houses more spotlessly neat than the natives, they say to each other, “I’m fine, everything is fine,” and they almost believe that they are. (143)

The appeal to “how richly” we might be “known,” and how richly language might enable us to be known, once again names an ideal—a paradise—from which those around Hoffman, whether immigrant or native, are often seen to fall. Bemused by her “bafflingly cheerful and sensible” [American] friend Penny, for example, she asks: “Where are her moods, her intensities, the invisible, shadowy part of her personality? I can’t penetrate all that transparency; it doesn’t give me enough crags and surprises to hook on to” (150). Penny’s cragginess and “strangled suffering” do emerge little by little as Hoffman learns to
read beneath the “smoothness” which hides the “gothic secrets” of Penny’s life and “of lives like hers” (151). Nevertheless, it takes Hoffman time and effort to discover the multilayered depths to Penny (and others) that would satisfy Hoffman’s desire to know and be known “richly.”

Others rarely achieve the fullness of reflective, communicative, and emotional being that Hoffman wants from them, either because social conditions are prohibitive, or because humans are always less than themselves, always less than they could be. The bewildering paradox of Hoffman’s book is that she cannot always or easily find the human—either in “basic” or “deluxe” versions—in humans. To find the human she has to look beyond the human, or at least to “special” instances of it—in classical music, for example: “If I can express the passions contained within a Beethoven sonata or the Chopin Berceuse,” she claims, recollecting a moment of youthful audacity, “then I know everything about being human. Music is a wholly adequate language of the self—my self, everyone’s self. And I am meant to speak this language; life wouldn’t be complete without it” (72). Another way of finding the “human beyond the human”—or at least beyond ordinary, everyday occurrences of it—is through fiction. “I know how anyone in the world feels,” she says to Marek, her childhood friend and sweetheart, because “I have just read Uncle Tom’s Cabin and have wept over Tom’s trials” (72). The discovery that there may be more life in fiction than in life itself is recapitulated more subtly several years later when, having finished graduate studies as a literature student and begun to teach literature to others, she records how she suddenly became attuned to the resonances and “inner sense” of literary English, and specifically T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”:

I hear the understated melancholy of that refrain, the civilized restraint of the rhythms reining back the more hilly swells of emotion, the self-reflective, moody resignation of the melody. “And I have known the eyes already, known them all—/ The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase . . .” I read, tasting the sounds on the tongue, hearing the phrases somewhere between tongue and mind. Bingo, I think, this is it, the extra, the attribute of language over and above function and criticism. I’m back within the music of the language, and Eliot’s words descend on me with a sort of grace. Words become, as they were in my childhood, beautiful things—except this is better, because they’re now crosshatched with a complexity of meaning, with the sonorities of felt, sensuous thought. (186)

Language here is fully communicative, appealing simultaneously and with no “dissociation of sensibility,” to use Eliot’s own phrase, to mind, heart, and body.
CONCLUSION

In story (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) and classical music, Hoffman finds emotional intensity. In literature she finds subtle modulations of thought and feeling. And she taps into all of these once more in the writing of the story of her life, in a “literary” autobiography that is at once deeply reflective, finely written, and emotionally intense and multifaceted. The standard Hoffman sets for being human is high, perhaps impossibly so. Her own experience is testimony to this, as she repeatedly bears witness to the loss of the human, to the fall of the human into the dehumanized and inhumane, to the reduced versions of self to which we are prey or which we actively embrace because it makes life seem simpler. Hoffman rarely does “simple,” although there are moments in the book—the recollected “moments of being” referred to earlier—when life takes on a kind of luminous simplicity. There may also be simple truths, such as the maternal truth that “everyone has feelings,” which serve as a compass, but the direction provided by these simple truths is often hard to follow given the tortuous routes human emotions can take. Most of the time, Hoffman wrestles with—and actively embraces—the complexities of human existence and interaction, for the complexities are part of life’s richness, are part of what makes for a “full” life. But they are also frustrating. And perhaps this frustration is what might propel us, alongside other provocations, into a post-meta-physical posthuman world where the human no longer causes consternation.

I have instead been arguing for a consternating, angst-ridden posthumanism, one which presses upon us the need to say again what we mean by humanism and the human. I don’t think we should give up on this task, for the dangers are too great, but I can see why it might be tempting to do so. Jean-François Lyotard argues that the postmodern condition is characterized by a slackening, in which the big questions do not matter anymore. Now that “eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture,” he writes, “it’s time to relax” (17). For “postmodern” we might now read “post-meta-physical posthuman” and the invitation not to take ourselves too seriously. And perhaps the attraction of focusing on other ontologies, such as the animal, might not only be ethically motivated, but a blessed relief from our own complicatedness. There are, however, too many reductions and objectifications of the human for us to be able to “relax.” Humanism needs once again to be recapitulated with the complexities, depth, and richness of literary life writing as at least one of its allies.

NOTE

1. See, for example, Eakin, Lauritzen, Marcus (239–45, 258–59), and Mousley.
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