Comment & Response

A Comment on Casey Boyle’s “Writing and Rhetoric and/as Posthuman Practice” (article available free at https://goo.gl/HH3Oir)
Matthew Overstreet

Like fashion or financial markets, it seems that trends in rhetoric and composition are subject to periodic correction. If mid-90s cultural studies, embodied by, say, James Berlin, is the most concerned our field has ever been with consciousness-raising critique, Casey Boyle’s “Writing and Rhetoric and/as Posthuman Practice” (July 2016) represents the opposite pole. Twenty years on, critique is most definitely out: practice is in. Professor Boyle’s essay is to be praised, I think, for capturing the nature of this swing and thoroughly articulating the investments and ideas behind it. Like a driver on an icy road though, I worry that Boyle, and the field as a whole, may be engaged in something of an overcorrection.

As Boyle sees it, rhetoric as posthuman practice “unfolds . . . as an ongoing series of mediated encounters” (534). It foregrounds the codependence of texts, bodies and things, acknowledges the “betweenness” of the human and nonhuman (540). Ultimately though, such practice is less concerned with cultivating awareness of our embeddedness “and more concerned with inventing techniques . . . with which we exercise that embeddedness” (538). These techniques—the moves that define the successful writer—largely operate on an unconscious level. This means that doing and doing and doing again is favored over analysis, practice over critique.

In a provocative move, Boyle positions rhetoric as posthuman practice against rhetoric as reflective practice. Viewed from a posthuman perspective, he argues, metacognition and reflection, privileged terms in rhetoric and composition, “have the potential to become bad habits,” because they encourage the “writer to separate herself from all those things with which she is codependent” (533).

Boyle also accuses “current critical rhetoric” (E.G. Berlin’s consciousness-
raising kind) of focusing on reflection purely as a means of increasing human agency. Again, this suggests distance and difference, which is problematic.

Admittedly, there is a lot to like about Boyle’s vision of posthuman practice. Sitting at my desk, simultaneously embedded in Microsoft Word, new materialism, a Beatles track, and a “heat dome,” it’s impossible not to feel the codependence he privileges. Likewise, raised on post-process, I recognize that many, if not most, of the moves a successful writer makes are unconscious, lying beyond the reach of either language or reflective thought. That said, should writing teachers really classify reflection as a bad habit? I think not.

To buy Boyle’s dismissal of reflection, we must deploy a very limited notion of what reflective practice entails. In short, we have to understand reflective practice as nothing more than the discovery and exploitation of causal relationships. I admit that viewed in this way, reflection takes on a regressive, positivist tint. Reflection means (should mean/has meant) more than this though. In its strong sense, reflection—thinking about thinking—implicates self and world in equal measure. As such, it becomes, over and above a source of agency, a way to limn the boundaries of one’s agency. It draws our attention, for example, to the extent to which our interests and experience shape things “as they are.” In this regard, thinking about thinking—reflection, critique, analysis—helps foster the humility and sense of connection that is so important to posthuman practice.

To illustrate my point, I’d like to turn to one of the high points of modern humanism, William Perry’s *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*. Published in 1970 and drawn from a survey of Harvard undergrads, this book seeks to chart just what exactly liberal education, in its mid-century, classically liberal form, does to students. As expected, Perry puts a strong emphasis on reflection. The “liberally educated man,” he concludes, “is one who has learned to think about even his own thoughts, to examine the way he orders his data and the assumptions he is making, and to compare these with other thoughts that other men might have” (44).

So here we see reflection presented as the very essence of liberal education. According to Boyle’s post-human critique, the result should be a rejection of codependence, an alienating Cartesian separation of subject and object, self from other. Interestingly though, Perry holds that the opposite is true. Reflection fosters connection, not division. From a position of self-evaluation and awareness, he writes, a thinker “can take responsibility for his own stand and negotiate—with respect—with other men” (44).

“Aha,” says the posthumanist, “other men. Perry is both sexist and blind to the universe of things.” Perhaps. I’d argue, though that without some awareness of how we “organize our data,” it’s impossible to truly respect things. As embodied, embed-
ded thinkers, we always approach the material world on terms shaped by our interests and experiences. Reflection helps us recognize this. It helps us see how we see, how others see, and to therefore, get a clearer (and more respectful) picture of the world.

Zooming out a bit, we can say that Perry, with his expansive vision of reflection, represents the humanist educational paradigm. His A+ student is one who is able to position herself, with her singular set of experiences, values, and biases, among a field of objects and others. While positing a plurality of (separate) entities, these entities are in no way self-contained. Instead, through the mediating efforts of rhetoric and reflection, they are capable of entering into (mutually constituting) negotiation.

As we’ve seen, rhetoric as posthuman practice seeks to supplant the humanist paradigm. Instead of a plurality, such thought stresses unity. Instead of conscious negotiation, framed by a sense of one’s limits, it seeks to utilize “practice’s repetitions to become attuned to and help foster the repetitions, rhythms, and relays that emerge across different media ecologies” (Boyle 543).

What would an A+ student look like under such a scheme? A particularly able Twitter bot comes to mind. Through “practice’s repetitions”—sending a lot of tweets and blindly adjusting its text based on the responses received—it could “become attuned” to the “repetitions, rhythms, and relays” necessary to garner likes and retweets. Such a rhetor could be said to work with and through ecological affordances (algorithms, news cycles). It could maximize connections (retweets) and sustain affective flows (likes). But is this bot a model for the subjectivity we want rhetoric and composition to engender?

I think not.

Besides feeling vaguely icky, the writer-as-Twitter-bot is problematic because it will ultimately fail as a thinker and writer. Without reflection and the self-awareness that arises therefrom, it will lack a “why” to its “how.” Therefore, when confronted with a novel situation—the kind that actual thinking humans face every day—it will be flummoxed. The connections it has created, being mindless, will be unsustainable.

As this indicates, while intrigued by Boyle’s notion of rhetoric as posthuman practice, I worry that such a vision can too easily lapse into solipsism. In short, reflection of the humanist kind is necessary to give us a sense of our values and biases (which are always there, even if unrecognized). Without this, it’s too easy to understand our version of the world as given. This ultimately impedes the sense of connection that both I, and Professor Boyle, hope to foster.

Works Cited

CASEY BOYLE RESPONDS

Did you know there is a Wikipedia page accounting for injuries and deaths that result from taking selfies? So frequent and notable are these accidents—catastrophes, really—that we have found a need to maintain a current list of the instances in which people have become injured or have perished when turning their camera upon themselves in a moment of technological reflection. The selfie, like the self-portrait before and the longstanding reflective essay, are among the machinations born from a habitual insistence of turning back a world, over and over, to enframe an individual and/or a group of human selves. Now, selfies and essays are not inherently bad in and of themselves, but those technological practices exacerbate a self-centered humanist orientation whose effects have escalated to global proportions. The anthropocene is occasioned, in large part, by the human over-turning a world back onto itself forming a loop that elides and consolidates multiple and varied relations down to a unified point not unlike those seen in the ever-narrowing arcs of a Fibonacci spiral. Keller Easterling follows the image and function of this spiraling thread to find the human’s “stubborn self-regard” whose “bad habits of mind” necessitate designing for the “more than human” in which we compose ourselves outside of that narrowing spiral. Echoing a need for an extra-human orientation, Rosi Braidotti proposes the posthuman as a way to “think differently about ourselves,” a difference that, I propose, requires practice in putting ourselves side-by-side with our relations and not above them.

Almost everything else in the soft assemblies of most organisms works by endless iteration, multiplication, or trial and error. Yet this stray symptom of stubborn self-regard holds sway over the entire organism, causing it to constantly circle a very limited repertoire of behaviors. Observing the fact that there do not seem to be other creatures who sit, with fins and flagellates limp, transfixed in thought about something like dialectic and telos, humans even make the mistake of thinking that this restrictive habit of mind is a gift that sets them above the rest. (Easterling)

[M]y interest in the posthuman is directly proportional to the sense of frustration I feel about the human, all too human, resources and limitations that frame our collective and personal levels of intensity and creativity. This is why the issue of subjectivity is so central . . . we need to devise new social, ethical and discursive schemes of subject formation to match the profound transformations we are undergoing. That means that we need to learn to think differently about ourselves. I take the posthuman predicament as an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and self-representation. The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming. (Braidotti 12)
As we repeatedly embrace humanist reflective practice as a distinctive gift to the world, we snap ourselves ever closer to catastrophe (katastrophē, overturning). Professor Overstreet has deemed my project a “dismissal of reflection” and metacognition, but it seeks not that end. Instead, the project aims to reframe reflection and metacognition toward other possible connotative associations. In fact, having wound ourselves into tighter and tighter loops via humanist reflection and metacognition, our only way out of our own self-orbits is to reverse the spiral’s course and strive toward escape velocity. To do so requires some form of the very mechanisms that got us here. Toward this unwinding, we might begin by neither calling for more reflection nor rejecting it but by rearticulating it as a process akin to rumination. Unlike the sense of the term that denotes an individual in deep thought, rumination here would connote the cow’s digestion in which something is chewed, swallowed, (partially) digested, regurgitated, and chewed once more as the process continues. Each stage in the process is not advancement toward a clearer or more complete understanding, but it proceeds as a series of incorporations. This series would not consolidate a self as much as repeatedly build and erode that self by multiplying its relations as embodied iterations, an ongoing exercise of becoming differently bodied.

Such practices might begin by simply panning the camera away from ourselves. In the earlier article, I referred to what Andrew Pickering called “tuning” as analogous to what I am calling posthuman practice, itself closer to reflection-as-rumination than reflection-as-conscious-thought. Tuning, for Pickering, is an activity wherein things like subjects and objects resolve from ongoing relations whose resolution is regulated less by feedback or reflection than by a feedforward production of difference. An example Pickering offers for tuning is Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s “panoramic seeing” that a train-human coupling affords (176). This orientation is brought about neither as a result of reflection nor by extending one’s senses but through incorporating differently in the world. I aimed to elaborate on this idea when I proposed that “. . . we might be exercising a similar posthuman practice with the rise of aerial photography drones, tuning into a ‘landscape vision’ that contributes another materially informed way of seeing (theoria) or another way of being in the world” (542). Unlike the selfie’s portrait, the landscape mode smoothly moves from the human subject toward an outward environmental survey. It is tempting to think of landscape vision as better because it extends the view of the operator, but that is not why I am drawn to it. It is not a “god’s-eye” view that Donna Haraway cautioned us against, but the production of another account. Rather than seen as extending the view of the operator, though it does do that, landscape vision escapes the orbit of its viewer without removing
her from being viewed. The successful landscape vision is one that starts in a familiar position (e.g., portrait/selfie) but it keeps going and going and going, incorporating additional elements without turning back on an original self. A landscape orientation proceeds by moving itself outward, taking its view as far as it can go given that particular environ—a survey, not only focus; feedforward, not only feedback; prospecting, not only reflecting.

The difference in orientations between the selfie’s portrait and the drone’s landscape might not seem immediately relevant to college writing, but it is. Consider Microsoft Word. Really, MS-Word. The default layout orientation for all academic writing, if not all writing, is portrait. How many of us have asked our students to change the orientation from portrait to landscape? What can a text do from a different orientation? Posthuman practice can be that simple. So when Professor Overstreet projects a Twitter bot as an ideal but flawed assignment for posthuman practice, he does so under the assumption that the question is an either/or choice between human or machine, thinking or machination, difference or repetition. I truly appreciate the opportunity afforded by Professor Overstreet to further elaborate my proposal that it might be possible to avoid the either/or formulation altogether and instead exercise both/and orientations. Thus, an aim for posthuman practice is not attempting to turn the page from the human but to rotate that page from its default settings and exercise less catastrophic ways of being in the world.

**Work Cited**


